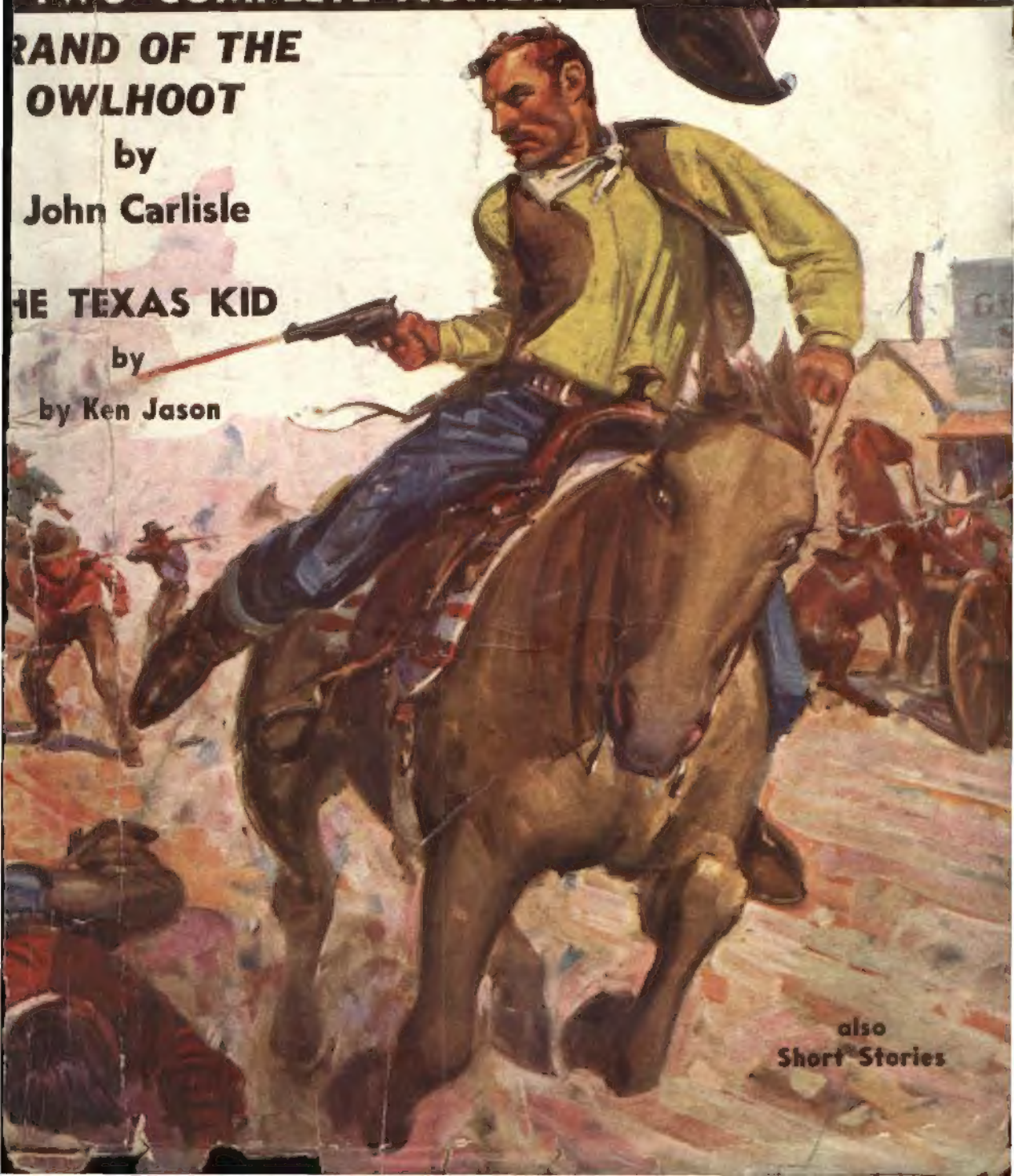
WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

¢
RUARY

TWO COMPLETE ACTION-PACKED NOVELS

RAND OF THE
OWLHOOT
by
John Carlisle

HE TEXAS KID
by
by Ken Jason



also
Short Stories

NEW BIG MONEY FIELD

for wide-awake men!

Selling New Specialty to Business *and* Professional Men

Four $15 Sales Daily Pay $280 Weekly

Boys, when salesmen have made a hundred to two hundred dollars in a week's time with a specialty THERE MUST BE SOMETHING TO IT! There is! Read here and see for yourself!

WORLD'S LARGEST FIRMS

Many of America's foremost concerns are among our customers. As well as selling thousands of installations to small merchants, professional men, etc., we number either the parent companies or branches, dealers, etc., of many world-famed concerns among our customers: Cities Service Oil Co., Great Lakes Fisheries, Inc., National Majestic Radio, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Damascus Steel Products, Public Utilities, Consolidated Motor Lines Corporation, Coca-Cola Bottling Co., National Radio, Central States Petroleum, United Aluminum Corp., Street Railways Advertising Co., Great American Life Underwriters, National Paper Co., and scores of others nationally known. Universities, newspapers, doctors, etc., buy substantial installations and heavy repeat orders.

THE SMALLEST BUSINESS CAN USE IT!

2 sizes—one costs $2.50—sells $7.50; your profit $5, and more, as your sales increase. Other size costs $5—sells $15.00—your profit $10 and more—no salesman working exclusively makes less than $12 profit per sale on this size! Think of that! GUARANTEED TO BRING CUSTOMER TEN TIMES ITS COST IN ACTUAL CASH.

HERE'S WHAT OUR MEN HAVE MADE!

Clears $58.55 in Day's Time

Joseph H. Robison, Pa.: "Just a note again. I had another good day's work today with fine results. My profit $58.55. Not bad for one day! (Your service) is certainly well received in this section and I am happy to report that it has grossed over $25,000 in the first fifteen weeks that I have represented you."

Over $300 First Week. G. F. Pegram, Texas: "I started right out making worthwhile money from the very beginning, clearing for myself over $300 my first week. And for the time I have put in, ever since I lined up with you, I have made more money in this business than I could possibly make in anything else I know of."

$2,000 Profit in 3 Months and 20 Days

August 1, 1936—"Since I made connections with your firm last April (13th) of this year, I have made a profit of nearly two thousand dollars and I have not worked full time. I work on an average of three hours a day as I take care of a small farm. The most I ever made in one day was $117.50. The only regrets I have is that I did not know of your firm long ago, as in this business you meet the best of people, make plenty of friends."—H. C. Powers, Sr., N. Y.

Write for Other Salesmen's Reports

We can send them as fast as you can read 'em. We've got plenty! See for yourself. Mail the coupon for further details.

YOU GET PORTFOLIO of LETTERS from WORLD'S LEADING FIRMS

Clinches the Sale!

A handsome, impressive portfolio that contains letters from the world's most famous concerns. Practically every type of business and profession represented. (135 in all.) You have immediate, positive proof of success. They can't say—"doesn't fit my business." Nails 'em right then and there. Sells them on sight.

SCORES OF SALESMEN HAVE JOINED US IN THE LAST 3 MONTHS

Boys, what does that tell you? We've had to work overtime to keep up with applications. Soon as we get the country covered with our exclusive contracts, we close up the list. Remember, this is no ordinary proposition. You deal with a company that doesn't split pennies, headed by a man who spent twenty years on the road. Get the facts. Mail the coupon for information.

NO HIGH PRESSURE—SIMPLY INSTALL IT—LET IT SELL ITSELF

Here is a business offering an invention so successful that we make it sell itself. Our representatives simply tell what they offer, show proof of success in every line of business and every section of the country. Then install the specialty without a dollar down. It starts working at once, producing a cash return that can be counted like the other cash register money. The customer sees with his own eyes a big, immediate profit on his proposed investment. Usually he has the investment, and his profit besides, before the representative returns. The representative calls back, collects his money. OUT OF EVERY $75 BUSINESS THE REPRESENTATIVE DOES, NEARLY $60 IS HIS OWN PROFIT!

SEEING IS BELIEVING—MAIL COUPON FOR PROOF

This is a business with a future to it. You can start small and grow big. This is the field that the young man should enter and grow with. The mature man has the seasoning of experience which should be exceedingly valuable in this business. You can get exclusive rights. With profits from your first business you may open an office, hire salesmen, branch out into open territory where available, after you get going. Exclusive contract puts you in position to build an established permanent business which can be sold like any other business. Give your customers satisfactory service and they will be your prospects for repeat orders as long as they are in business.

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Send Me Exclusive Territory Proposition!

F. E. Armstrong, Pres., Dept. 4093-A, Mobile, Ala.

Without obligation to me, send me full proposition.

Name.....

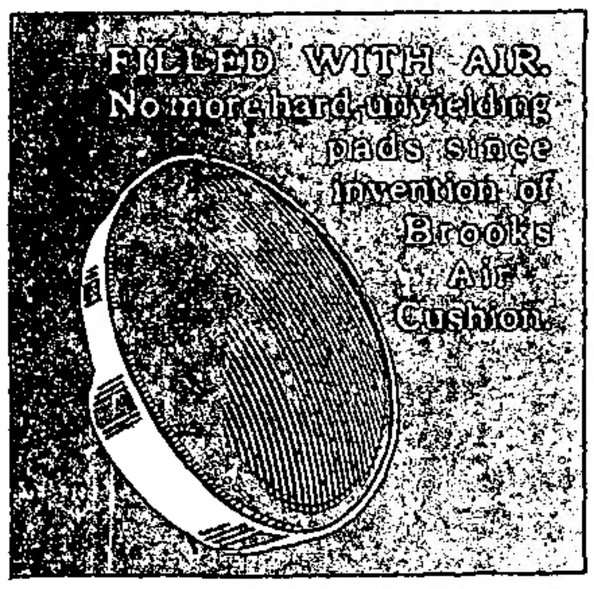
Address.....

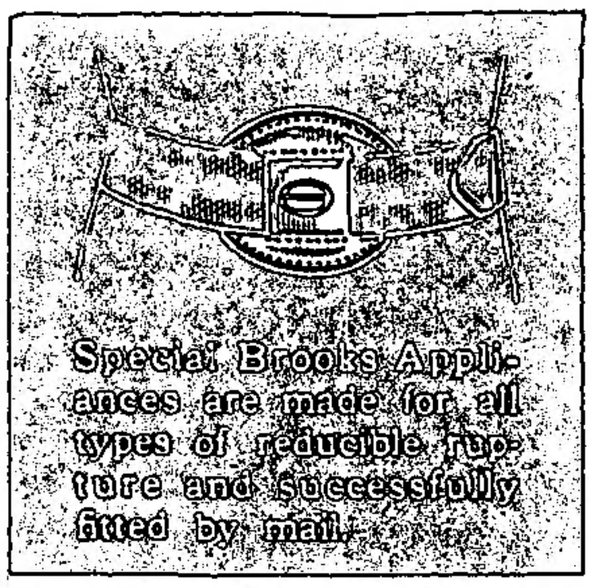
.....

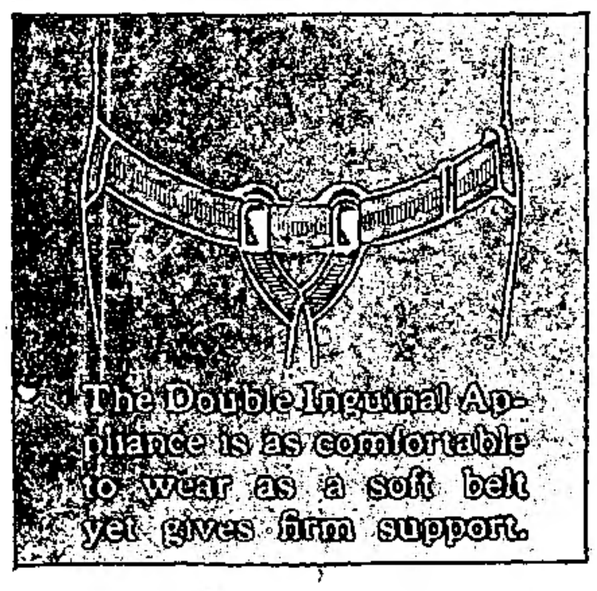
City.....

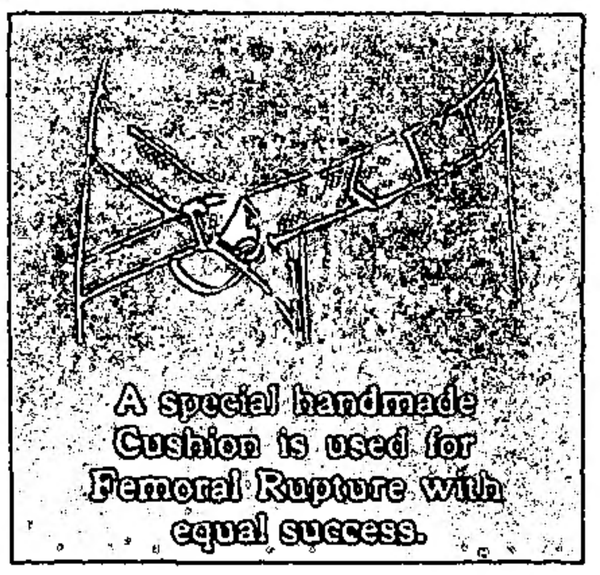
State.....

STOP YOUR Rupture Worries!









Learn About My Perfected RUPTURE INVENTION!

WHY worry and suffer any longer? *Learn now about my perfected invention* for all forms of reducible rupture. It has brought ease, comfort and happiness to thousands of men, women and children by assisting Nature to restore the natural strength to the weakened muscles and close the opening. *You can imagine how happy* these thousands of rupture sufferers were when they wrote me to report that they had no further use for any kind of a support. How would YOU like to be able to feel that same happiness—to sit down and write me such a message—a few months from today? Hurry—send coupon quick for Free Rupture Book, self-measuring chart and PROOF of results!

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives Nature a Chance to CLOSE the OPENING

Surprisingly—continually—my perfected Automatic Air Cushion supports the weakened parts allowing Nature, the Great Healer, to swing into action! All the while you should experience the most *heavenly* comfort and security. No obnoxious springs, metal girdles or hard pads. No salves or plasters. My *complete* Appliance weighs but a few ounces, is durable, inconspicuous, sanitary and cheap in price. Wouldn't you like to say "goodbye" to rupture worries and "hello" to NEW freedom . . . NEW glory in living . . . NEW happiness with the help of Mother Nature and my *perfected* Air Cushion Appliance?

PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases.

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 31,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

"Completely Recovered"

"This is to certify that I have completely recovered from my rupture after wearing your Appliance for one year. It has been two years since I quit wearing your Appliance and I surely feel fine and not bothered with the rupture at all."—Albert J. Cupps, 960 Dodge St., Dubuque, Iowa.

Likes Brooks Best

"I bought one of your Rupture Appliances in 1933, wore it day and night for one year and laid it aside last December. The rupture hasn't bothered me since. I used several others without success until I got a Brooks."—J. B. McCarter, Route 2, Box 104, Oregon City, Ore.

"Runs and Plays"

"My son has not worn the Appliance for over a year. He wore one for ten years and I am very grateful now to think he has laid it aside. He is twelve years old, runs and plays hard like all boys and is never bothered about the rupture."—Mrs. M. George, Route 1, Box 103, Cumberland, Md.

SENT ON TRIAL!

My invention is never sold in stores nor by agents. Beware of imitations! You can get it only from my U. S. factories or from my 33 foreign offices. *And I'll send it to you on trial.* If you don't like it—if it doesn't "work"—it costs you NOTHING. But don't buy now. Get the facts about it FIRST! Write me today. I'll answer in plain envelope with interesting information *Free.* Stop Your Rupture Worries—send coupon. All correspondence strictly confidential.

Brooks Appliance Co.
209-G State St.
Marshall, Michigan

CONFIDENTIAL COUPON for RUPTURE SUFFERERS

H. C. BROOKS, President
209-G State St., Marshall, Mich.

Rush me your Free Book, self-fitting chart, proof of results, **all without obligation,** and in plain envelope.

C. E. BROOKS
Inventor

Name _____

Street _____

City _____ *State* _____

State whether for man, ☐ *woman* ☐ *or child* ☐

WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

JAMES RANDALL, *Editor*

Vol. III, No. 4 *February, 1937, Issue*

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The kid follows the trail of a gang that killed his best pal and his thundering guns send a flaming challenge to every man crossing his trail.

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A fighting cowhand takes the brand of the longrider to clean a rustler hole of thieves and killers.

Two Smashing Short Stories

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Cover by J. W. Scott

Illustrations by L. F. Bjorklund

For the best, read a RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE: Complete Western Book, Western Novel and Short Stories, Western Fiction Monthly, Best Western, Two-Gun Western Novelets, Ka-Zar, Star Sports, True Crime, All Star Adventure Magazine, Quick Trigger Western Novels, Star Detective, Western Short Stories, Best Love Magazine, Best Sports Magazine, Modern Love Magazine. *Look for the Red Circle!*

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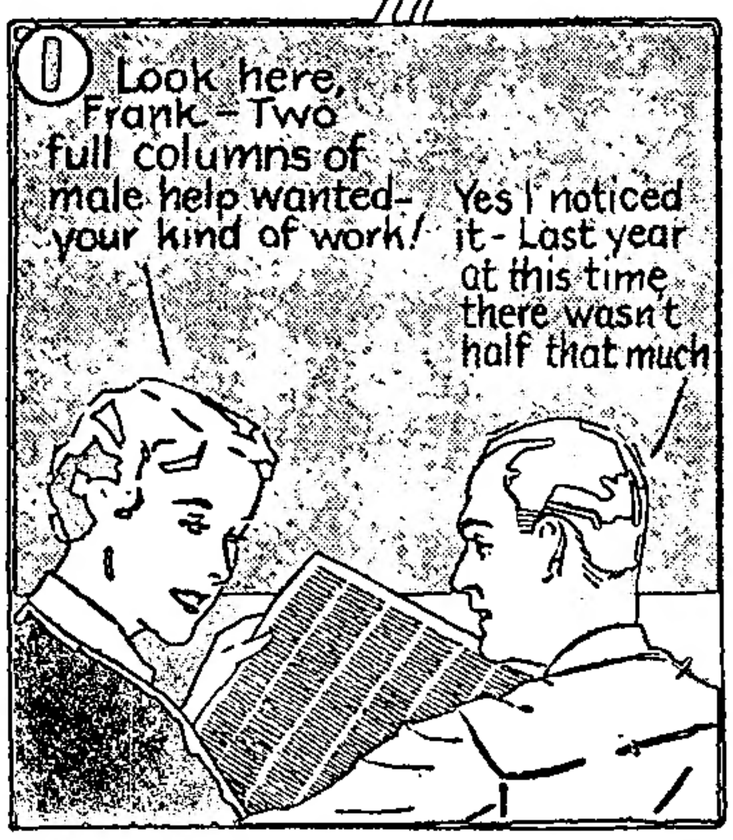
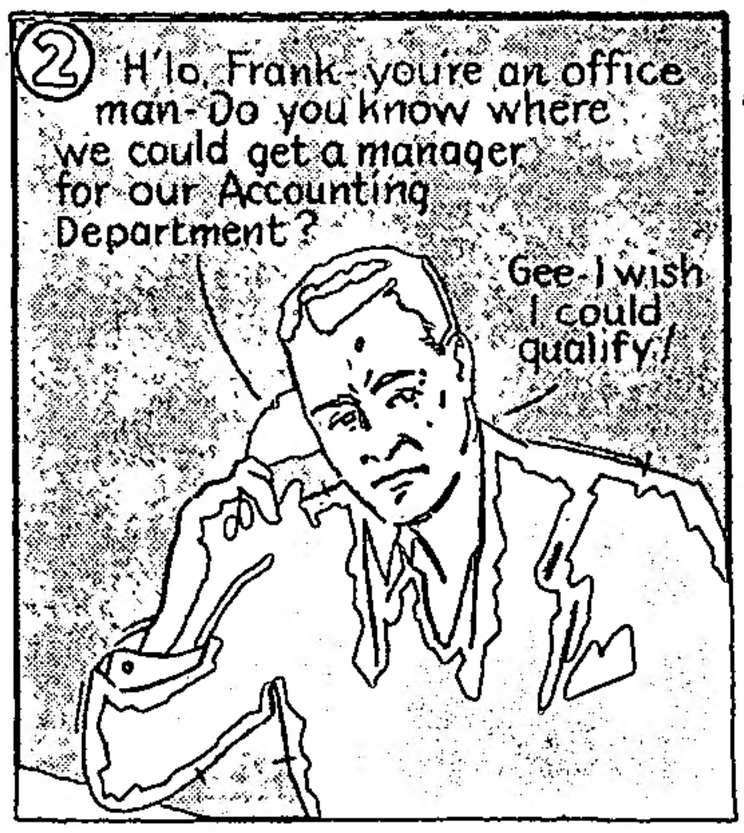
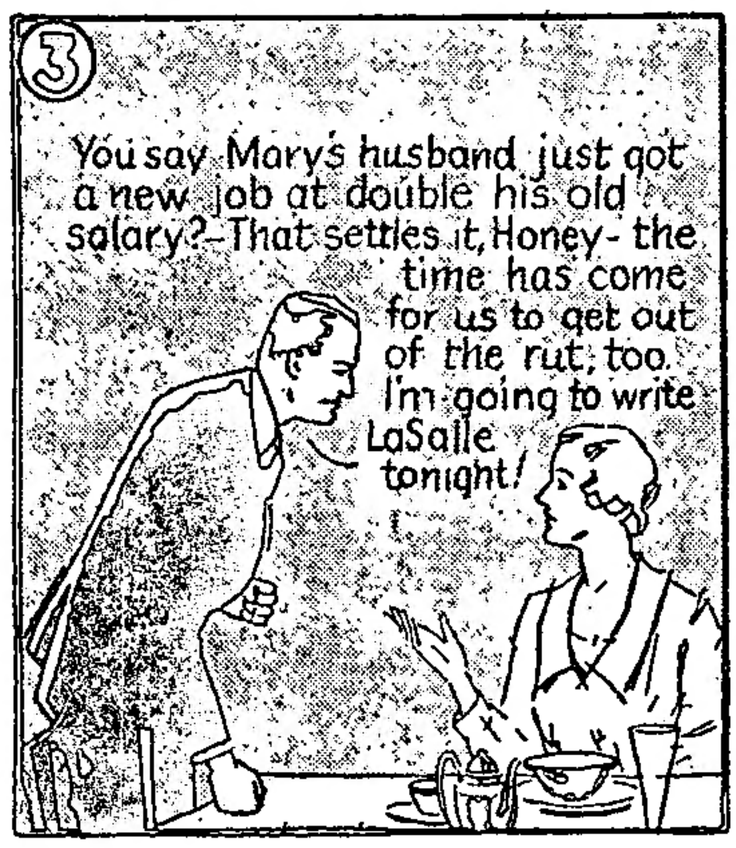
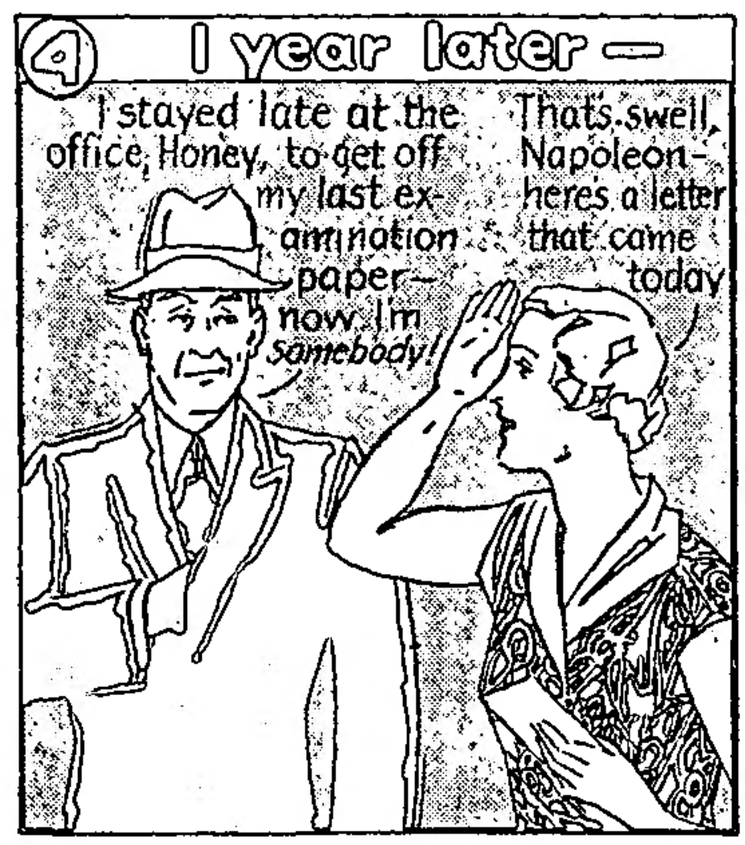
When jobs are looking for men —that's news!









NOW IS THE TIME!

RIGHT now, in many lines there is a search for really *good* men—managers, leaders—men who can take charge of departments, businesses, branch offices, and set things humming.

As always, there are not enough ordinary jobs to go 'round—but rarely before in the history of American business, has there been so much room at the *top!* New jobs are being created by the business pick-up in almost all lines.

Ordinarily, there would be plenty of men to fill these jobs—men in junior positions who have been studying in spare time. But most men have been letting their training slide during these dark years of depression . . . "What's the use?"—You have heard them say. Perhaps there has been some excuse for sticking to any old kind of a job one could get the past few years—but the door is wide open for the man with ambition *NOW!*

And don't let anyone tell you that "Opportunity Only Knocks Once"—that's one of the most untruthful sayings ever circulated. Opportunities flourish for *every* American every day of his life.

Far more to the point is to be ready—be *prepared*—to make yourself *interesting* to the big-time employer—and LaSalle offers you a short-cut method of qualifying for opportunity jobs in accounting, law, traffic, executive management, and kindred occupations.

LaSalle Extension University is 27 years old—40,000 students enroll annually—60 American firms each employ 500 or more LaSalle-trained men—surveys show that LaSalle students attain 40% average salary increase after graduation—10% of all C. P. A's in the U. S. A. are LaSalle-trained—in two states over 60% of the C. P. A's. are LaSalle-trained men.

Why not find out what LaSalle has done and is doing for men in *your* position? Send and get the facts; see what LaSalle can do for you, personally!

There's no question about it—business is picking up—jobs are looking for *trained men*—the time has come for you to *qualify* for prosperity. Mail this coupon today!

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Kindly send me your free booklet on the business field I have checked—and tell me how your training in that field can help me.

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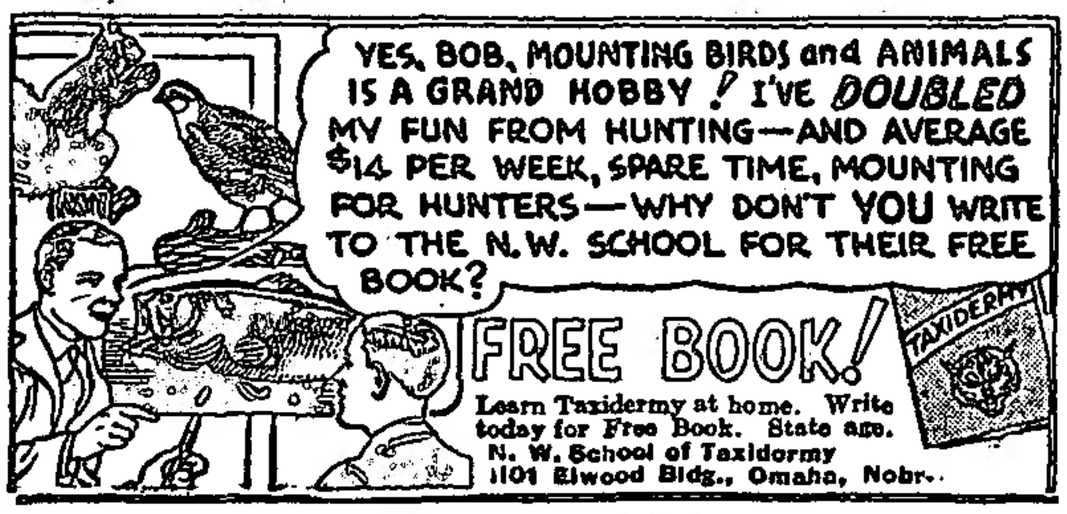
Private formula ointment used by the McCleary Clinic, as part of its regular treatment of rectal cases. May now be used in your home. It soothes and gives much temporary relief. Large trial tube sent to any rectal sufferer for 10¢ to pay postage and incidental charges. THE McCLEARY CLINIC, 634-A Elms Blvd. Excelsior Springs, Mo.

Get the true detective facts from

TRUE CRIME

Magazine



HELL BREAKS LOOSE!

—but this shooting fool's ridden the tough trails before and cleaning up this town is all in a day's work . . . One of the two big complete novels in the current issue of QUICK TRIGGER WESTERN NOVELS Magazine . . . by the best-liked western author today—Eugene Cunningham!

THE second big novel is by J. E. Grinstead, the thrilling story of a man that was branded a killer even though he had blazed his guns only in self-defense . . . but when "The Lightning Kid" went into action, that hard-case gunmen's rendezvous never knew just what hit them!

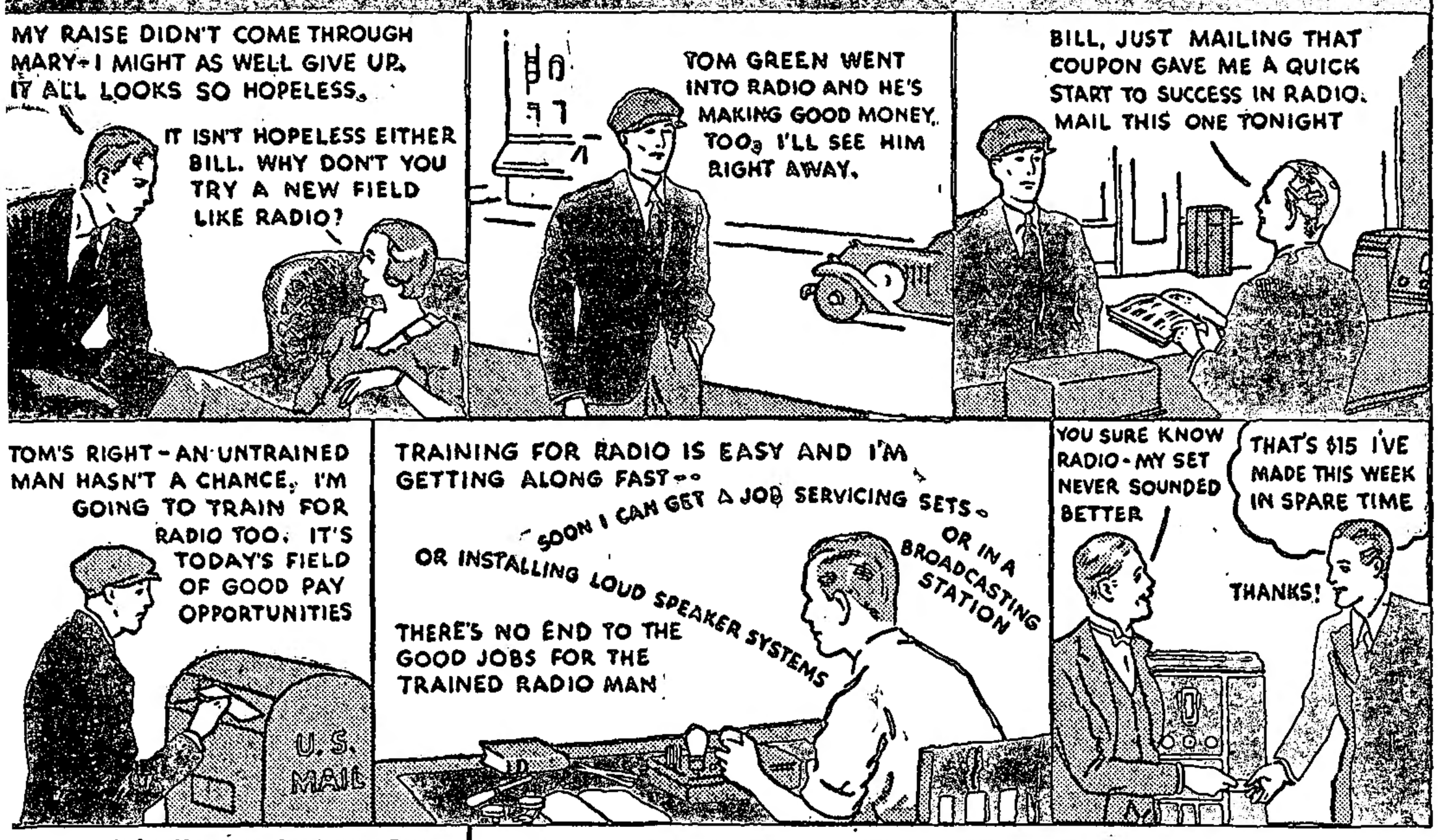
AND that 's not all! There's a smashing novelette by Allan Vaughan Elston, "Outlaw Stampede." Then to top off this corking good issue we give you a smoking short story by Oscar Schisgall, an absorbing account of a "Rustlers' Haven".

DON'T MISS THIS ISSUE!

NOW ON SALE!

QUICK TRIGGER WESTERN NOVELS MAGAZINE

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!



N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
The man who has directed the home study training of more men for Radio than any other man in America.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send special equipment which gives you practical experience—shows you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important Radio principles.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a post card—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7AK1
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

THIS FREE BOOK HAS HELPED HUNDREDS OF MEN MAKE MORE MONEY

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

N.R.I. Training Increases Yearly Salary $1,200

Since securing my erator's license rough N. R. I. aining, I've been gularly employed d am now chief eneer with WJBY. y salary has ineased $1,200 in Rao."—JULIUS C. ESSELS, Station JBY, Gadsden, labama.

$10 to $25 a Week in Spare Time

"I am making from $10 to $25 a week in spare time while still holding my regular job as a machinist. I owe my success to N. R. I."—WM. F. RUPP, 130 W. 6th St., Conshohocken, Pa.

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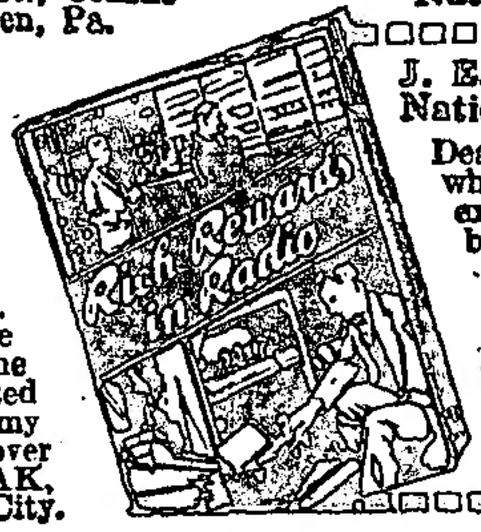
"After completing the N. R. I. Course I became Radio Editor of the uffalo Courier. Later I started Radio service business of my wn, and have averaged over ,500 a year."—T. J. TELAAK, 7 Broadway, New York City.



J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7AK1
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

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ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

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WANTED—Names of men desiring outdoor work; $125-$175 month; patrol forests; protect game. Qualify immediately. Details Free. Write

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Get into RADIO REAL JOBS REAL PAY

Earn While Learning at Home!

Television, Photo Electric Cells, Public Address

Many R-T-I Trained Men make up to $75 a week and more in full-time radio jobs — $5-$15 in spare time alone. More trained men needed. Learn at home by quick, easy, R-T-I WAY. Endorsed by 50 big concerns. Write for big Opportunity Book FREE.

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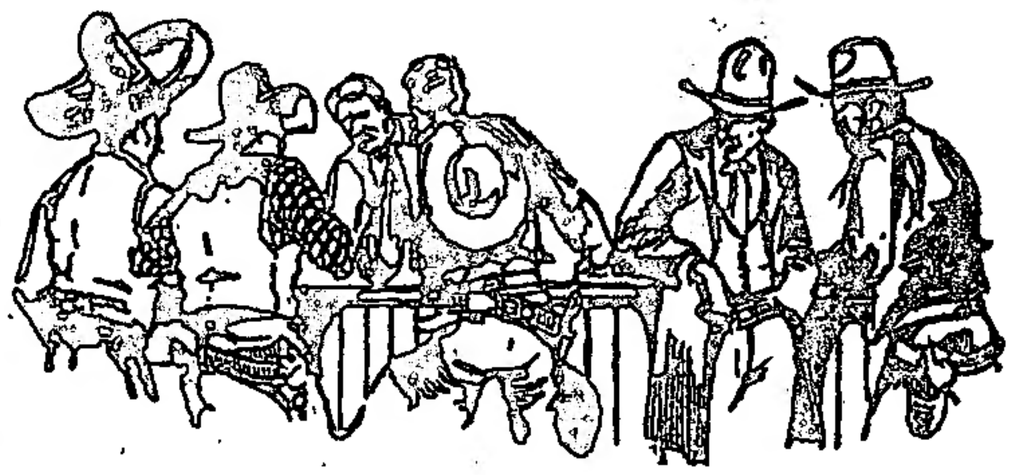
PHILCO CROSLEY ZENITH GRUNOW and 46 other mfgrs. endorse R-T-I



SOUTHWEST OF THE LAW

—is the hard-bitten town of Rawhide, where men lived by the rule of self-preservation and the jaws of death opened wide for any rider entering this "robbers' roost"! But read how a lone cowboy, a two-gun streak of lightning, fearlessly matched his guns and guts with the toughest outlaw bunch on the border!—by Clem Yore. One of the two big novels in the current issue of BEST WESTERN now on sale!

J. E. Grinstead's "Phantom Rustlers" is the second big novel in this action-packed issue! Thousands of cattle stolen, not a trace of them—then this rustler-hunter, powerful Bob Slater, takes the job of solving it and guns roar and death rides the range in a great gun-smoke showdown!

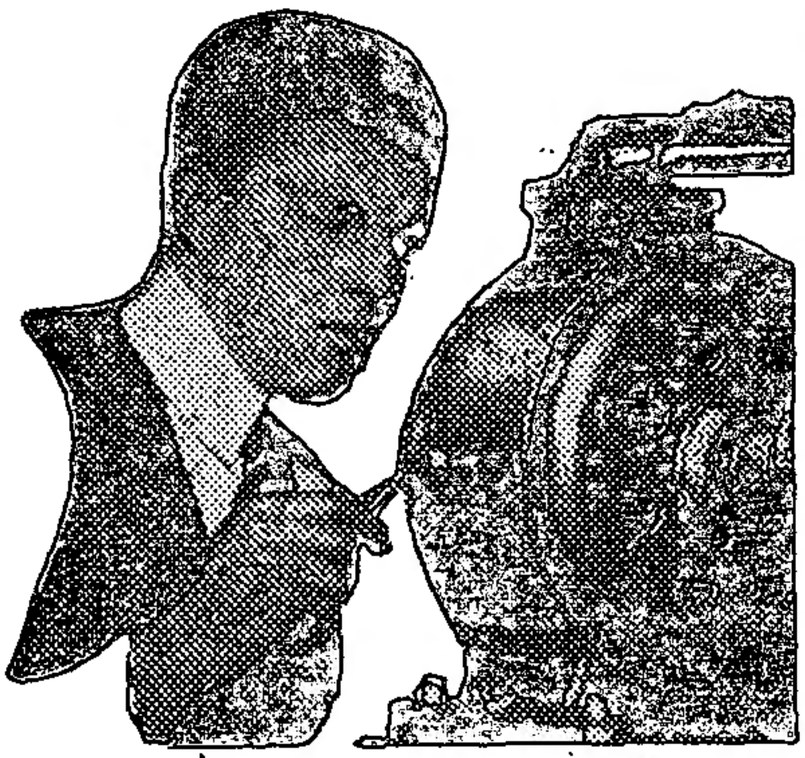
And

Three Smashing Short Stories!

PISTOL POISON by Mojave Lloyd
BIRTH OF SAN ANTONIO by James Hall
BULLET BLUFF by Eugene Cunningham

all in the current issue of

BEST WESTERN MAGAZINE



EASIER WAY TO SUCCESS in ELECTRICITY

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Opportunities for a Good Job, or a Business of Your Own

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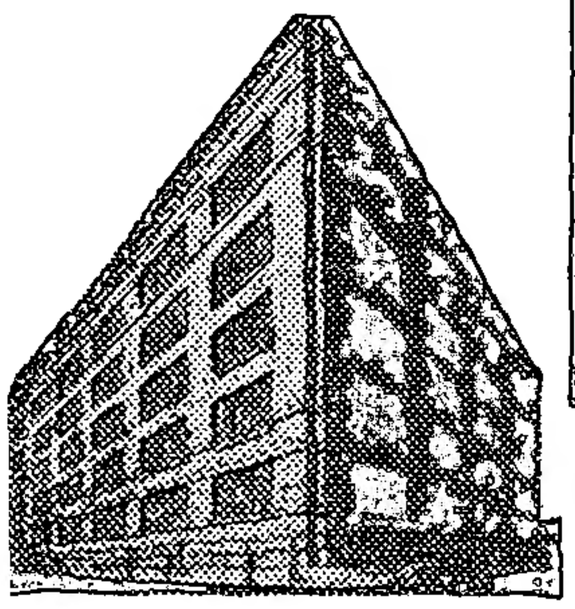

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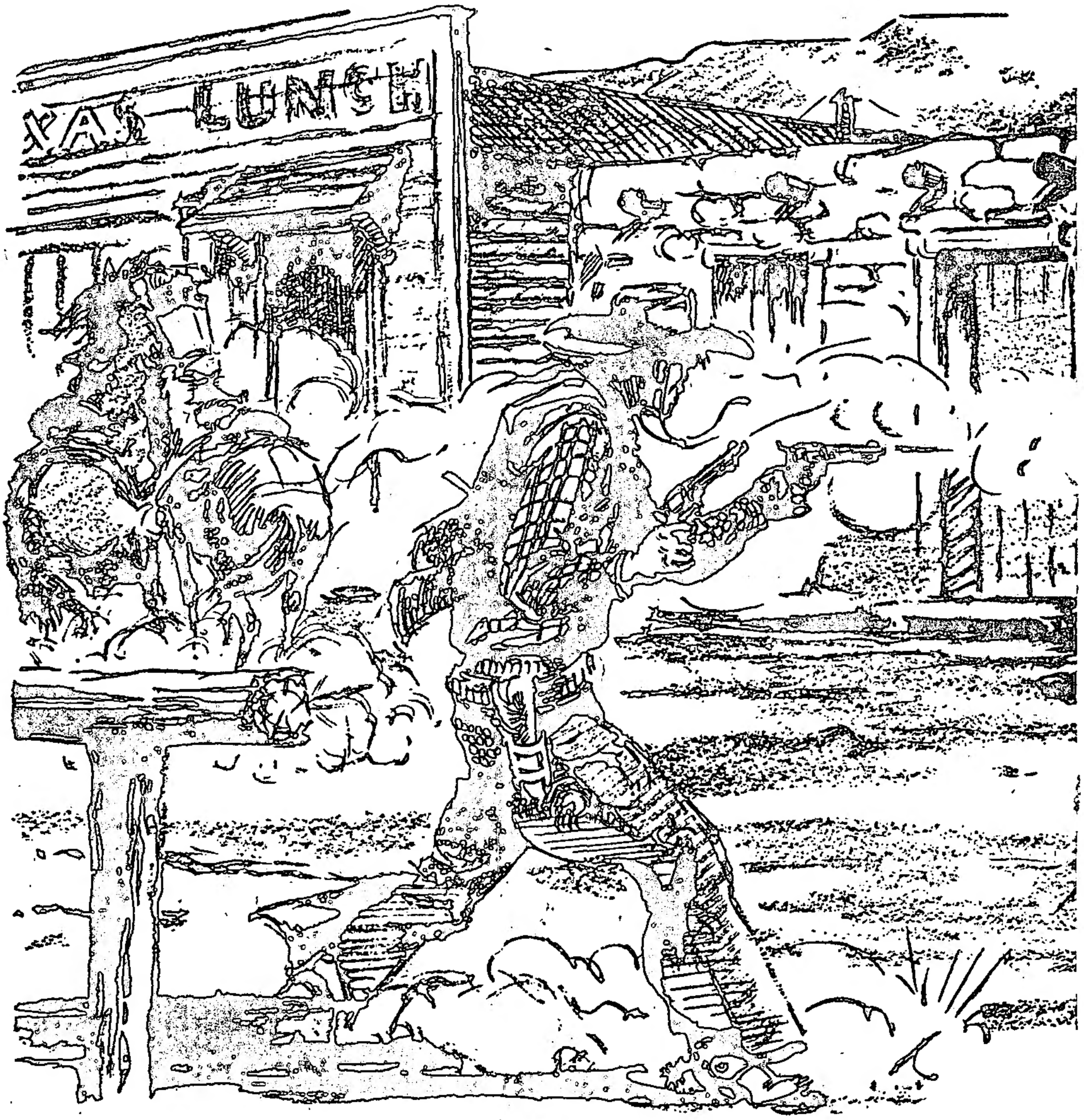


The Texas Kid

by Ken Jason

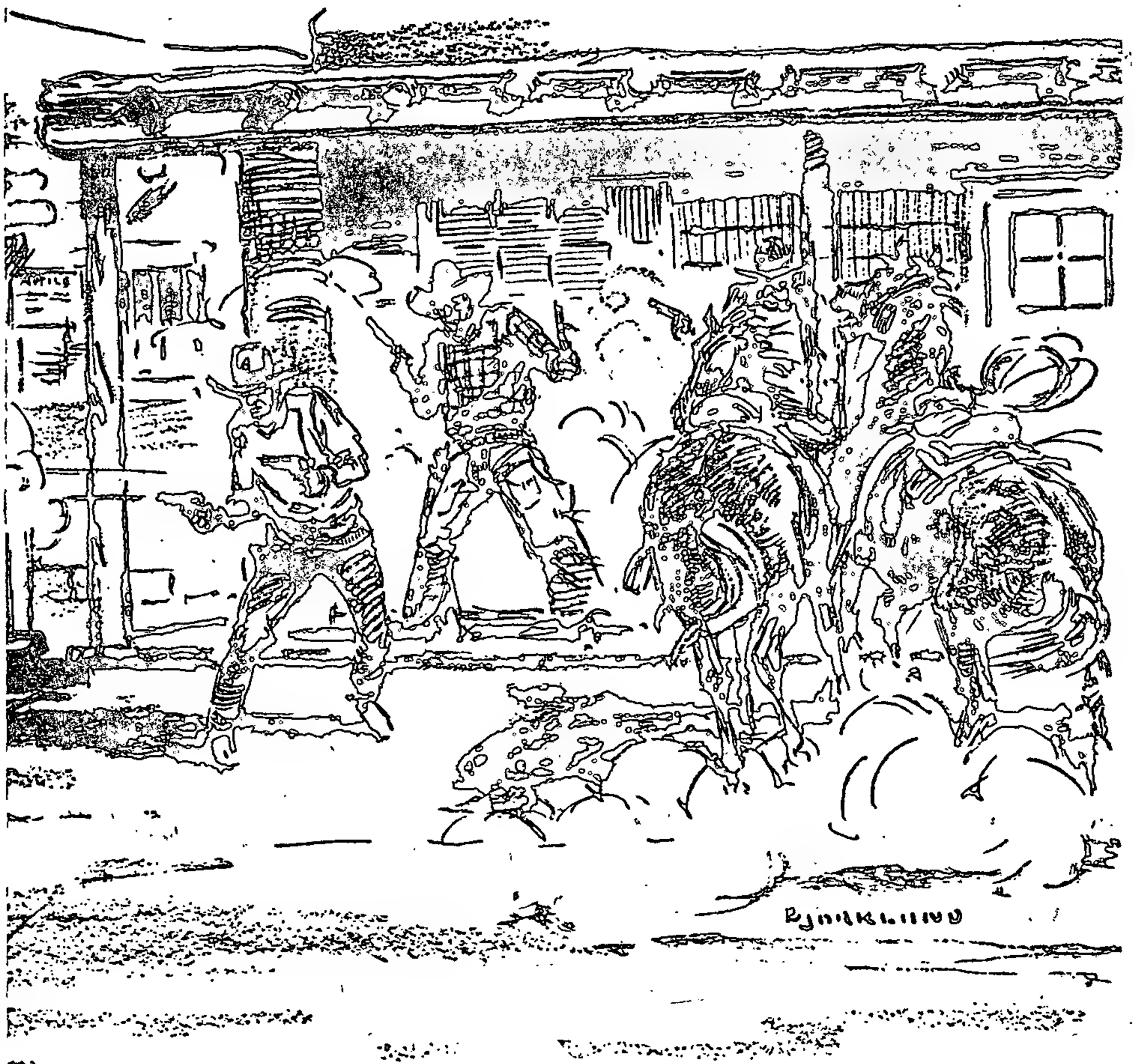
The kid follows the trail of a gang that killed his best pal and his thundering guns send a flaming challenge to every man crossing his trail.

CHAPTER I

The Kid Rides

THE TEXAS KID had come up from Burnet with a string of Johnson and Murdock cows, as a trail hand. There were three thousand head in that herd as they were thrown on a bed ground after crossing the Red River at Doan's store. And on that same pasture were some seven thousand additional cows.

Here the herd was to be worked over. Beef cows were to be cut out and shoved north in a bunch. The work started early, and before night five hundred head at been selected. All the time Red River was full of wading or swimming



cattle. Eleven herds were in sight and before sunset most of these had crossed the river.

That night came a thunder storm the like of which The Kid had never seen. Lightning popped like cannon, and the rain fell in torrents. The cattle stampeded and before morning thirty-five thousand head were mixed up and scattered for miles across the plains. Men were surly, and horses were exhausted. It took days to gather up stampeded cattle and rumor had it that many of the more peaceful outfits lost hundreds of heads of unbranded stock due to thieving drivers who had moved on north.

The Kid was riding back to where his spread had camped when he saw a cowboy dart up to a Mexican herder and strike the man over the head with a quirt. The Mexican tried to escape the stinging bite of that strip of leather, but the more he dodged the more fiercely fell the quirt. The Kid spurred his horse close to the cowboy's.

"Drop that quirt, fella!" he shouted, at the same time tilting his six-shooter in its sheath.

"This greaser," yelled the cowboy, "he was a-saying that I and my boss took a lot of his outfit's cows! I don't allow no man—"

"Señor," cried the Mexican, "I see dese fallar drive off the cattle. I know dese cows. Dey come from where in Mexico I been born as boy. I know many cows, from look in they eye and from ride along sixty day by they side."

"You liar!" Down fell the quirt again. And off flew the Kid on top of the cowboy. It was nip and tuck for a moment, and then out came the cowboy's gun. The Kid's Colt crashed on the man's head and knocked him cold. Men were running from all directions. They crowded about the Kid and stared at the bloody-faced man on the earth

now just picking himself from the grass.

"That's all you want, I reckon," said the Kid.

"I'll get you, fella," snapped the cowboy. "I'll get you, if it takes twenty years!"

"Come on Rowdy," said a tall, vicious-looking man reaching the side of the maddened cowboy. "Let's get out of here. We're all ready to move. Are you going crazy?"

"What's wrong?" asked a patriarchal-looking old man of the Mexican. "Didn't I tell you not to get into trouble Pedro?"

"Dese fallars, señor," gesticulated the Mexican indicating the two men moving out of the group, "drove off two hundred head of your cows! I rode to other vaqueros, but they laugh at me."

"What!" roared the big man who had removed the cowboy the Kid had fought. "What did you say?" he jumped back like a flash.

"He said," replied the Kid, quietly, "that you've got two hundred head of his boss' cows. Seems to me you oughta be able to disprove that. Why don't you allow this old gentleman to see what you've got bunched?"

FOR reply the big fellow jerked his gun but the Kid's barked and the man's form spun around and fell in a heap. He clawed at an arm and cursed as he moaned.

Wholesale trouble loomed as partisans formed in the circle of onlookers. But the cowboy, Rowdy, assisted his companion to his feet and took him away toward a chuck wagon. The Kid, with the Mexican and the old rancher, who was his boss, mounted and rode from the scene of the encounter.

"Señor," said the Mexican, "for dese thing what you do I nevair, nevair forget. Sometam, Pedro Sanchez, he go for to mak you much obliged for what you do this day. You hav safe Pedro's life, mebbe!"

"That's all right, Pedro," answered the Kid. "I reckon it wasn't no cut-in of mine, but I never could see no man pick on no other man like that." Then he turned to Pedro's employer. "Are you a-going to let them crooks steal your cows, sir?" he asked.

"What can I do?" said the old man. "I have nothing but Mexicans with me, for I brought these cattle out of Mexico and am driving them to Dodge, and I wouldn't get any sympathy here from the other drivers."

"Well, if it was me," said the Kid, "I'd sure go smoking over to that outfit and take what was mine or leave something laying on this prairie."

"No," said the timid old man. "I can't afford to get into a fight here, I might lose all I've got—maybe get killed into the bargain." The Kid rode away.

"Adios, *amigo!*" cried Pedro.

Late that night, as the Kid came in from nighthawking, his foreman walked up to him and gave him some money.

"You light out, Kid," he said. "And get to going, fast!"

"What's the idea? Are you firing me?" asked the Kid.

"No, not firing you, but giving you what wages is due to you. That fight you got into today is sure raising all kinds of hell. The drivers here is split into two camps. You mixed it with Rowdy Evans and Black Pete. While you didn't kill Pete you crippled his arm and he's plumb wild. Them two's poison!"

"I don't move out because of that kind o' men," spoke the Kid quietly. "And I ain't skeered of a bunch like that, at no time. I reckon I stays and goes to work for that Mexican's boss."

"Now Kid, you hit the sand! Ride circle to this big bunch. It's dark enough, Lord knows, and wait for us farther along. If you don't want to do

that meet up with us in Ogalalla or Julesburg. If you're in this camp in the morning we'll all have to burn powder. Rowdy and Black Pete has stirred up the rest of these drivers something awful. Now, be a good guy and let me get my bunch on the way. I wants to head out of here tomorrow, sure."

A wave of disgust fled over the Kid. He pocketed the money and stared into the fire.

"Kind o' low down, I calls it," he said, "to shove a lone man out in this country. And him without nothing but a little coin what he can't spend."

"Take a couple o' horses, Kid, and select any you want; but you knows I'm trying to do the best by Johnson and Murdock and if I got into a battle here we might lose all we've got."

"I'll take the big blue roan," said the Kid. "Good-bye, and good luck, all you boys!"

CHAPTER II

Black Pete's Net

THE first of September found the Kid at work on the Pecos River; the first of December he was around Santa Fe looking for a job. At the first of the year he was riding into Las Vegas when he met a rancher who told him he had a good all-winter job for him near Wagon Mound. The Kid decided to accept and told the man so.

In Vegas they strolled into a general store where the man ordered a list of groceries. They they walked across the street and into a saloon. *And even as he entered he regretted he had done so.*

But, entering, he would not back out. He strode to the bar and had a small drink of Mexican grape. Down at the end of the bar a group of men had gathered and there was one face in this crowd which made the Kid's heart palpitate; and this belonged to a man whose right arm hung useless at his side. Black Pete! The Kid knew him at once. And what was far more vital, Black Pete knew him.

Eyes stared into eyes, look met look! And the instant became alive with a hateful ominous quality making the room galvanic.

Black Pete said something, under his breath, and a man swung a look over his shoulder at the Kid. That man was Rowdy Evans. A white mark showed above his eyes. The Kid's gun scar!

Rowdy leaped into the center of the room and out flashed his gun. The Kid sidestepped and faced him. His gun was in evidence, too! It looked as if—

"The first of you two wolves what pulls a trigger," shot a voice through the room, "I drops with nine buckshot. The second I gets with my other barrel. Put up them guns and *talk* this thing out. I does the only killing in this say-loon."

Out of the tail of an eye the Kid saw a sweep of a gun barrel along the bar. Rowdy stuffed his gun into its holster. "Now it's your turn, kid," said the voice. The Kid swung about and put away his six-shooter. Back of the bar, dressed altogether in pure white linen, his face the color of a corpse, his eyes like burnt holes in a blanket, and his body emaciated to a hideous degree stood Cool Herbert, the proprietor. Obviously he was consumptive.

"Much obliged," said the Kid, "and for fear I might break a rule of this joint I aims to mosey." He whirled toward the door.

"Wait a minute!" yelled Black Pete rushing out of his gang. "See that arm?"

"Uh-huh," answered the Kid. "Didja get that old man's cows to the railroad?" Black Pete was staggered at the words.

"You shot that arm into a mess. I'll

never use it again. And I'm tellin' you that New Mexico is too small for I and you, both," he roared.

Cool Herbert's gun still appeared over the bar. It was a ten-gauge, choke-bore, muzzle loading, saw-off shotgun. It was a deadly looking weapon and the eyes above and behind it were equally deadly.

"Boys," said Cool, "what I said goes, now! Don't make no mistake about that. All of you is newcomers to me, but if you knew me you'd know that I ain't got enough lungs to give a potato bug anything but a gasping sort o' breath. This being so, when I says I'll shoot second, after one of you opens this dance, I means just what I says. If you craves fight and wants to tear loose in here two of you is a-going to need a wooden kimono when old Matilda quits barking. If I goes I'll say, 'thank you, sir!' "

"I'm listening," answered the Kid.

"They won't be a shot fired by me," said Black Pete, "but I warns this slat-built Texas Kid—" and right there was where the heart of the saloonman went out to the Kid—"to move out and stay out of any place I'm in. I shoots on sight, and so does any of my boys."

"That's big talk in this country," said Cool Herbert.

"And it's big talk in any country," added the Kid, "but I reckon it won't dam up any blood in my windpipe. I shot that bird's arm up when he tried to draw on me after I braided my Colt's butt over that Rowdy's brow for quirting a skinny little old greaser who had caught Rowdy stealing some of his employer's cows. See that white mark over his eyes? That's where I bedded down the hammer to my gun. If I had of stayed on at Doan's Store my skull would now be laying along side of some old buffalo bull's. I aims to live peaceable around this place, but I aims to live, just the same."

SEVERAL of Black Pete's boys shuffled out of the place by a side door. The Kid saw this; caught a sidewise look one of the men cast in his direction. Then he bolted through the door. And as he flung the exit wide he saw a running form dart into view from the rear. There was an explosion almost in his face, as he heard the glass tinkle back of him and he knew that a bullet had missed his head and struck the saloon's window. His own gun cracked and a man dropped, face down, almost at his feet.

A head appeared around the corner and then vanished. Beside the Kid on the walk stood a tall, whitehaired man. A fine looking man he was—leather brown of face, dusty and travel stained, and the Kid realized that he was no part of the gang which was after him. The man spoke.

"I saw it, son, and now you get on your bronc. I saw him fire, first, and I saw who was back of him. Get going and I'll keep them off your track, until you're started."

The Kid forgot the man who had offered him a winter job; forgot Black Pete and Rowdy Evans in the surge of admiration which welled into his brain as the old man pulled a heavy revolver and held it firmly against his hip. Cool Herbert came running to the door. "Stand back, you low-lifed skunks!" he yelled viciously to the men in the saloon. "This kid is going to have a chance, hear me?" Then at the spot where he heard the Kid talking to the old man he cried, "son, I am leaving here in a few days for the gold diggings out beyond Paradise Mountains. If you comes thataway, look me up!"

"I sure will," answered the Kid.

"And me, too," said the old man near the door. "My name is Jackson Tilton and I live on a ranch at the head of Paradise Valley. Come on out and get yourself a gold mine!"

"Thank you, sir, I knows only cows, broncs, mule-skinning and bull-whacking. Good-by, you-all!"

He turned his blue roan around and started out of Vegas.

And as he galloped it seemed that his heart was heavy as with a cold and clammy weight.

He stayed with a Mexican sheep herder that night; continued on south the next day; cut across the Pecos and rode south and south and south.

At Alamogordo he went into a store to purchase some provisions and when these were packed back of his saddle he walked the roan to a blacksmith shop and had him shod. Here he bought an extra set of plates and a hammer and nails. These he was stuffing in a saddle pocket when he saw two men cross the street and go into a saloon. The face of one of these seemed to excite his interest. Where had he seen it? Was that fellow one of the cowboys he had met at Doan's Store on the Red River?

The man had looked him squarely in the eye and then had quickened his pace. Why? Shucks, he was getting nervous! Anyhow, he'd have to stay in Alamogordo that night. The roan oughta have a rest and a couple of heavy feeds of grain. He was ganted down some already. The Kid decided to stable the horse and go get himself a bed and a meal.

It was while he was eating that a bartender of the Silver Front saloon who sat beside him whispered into his ear as the Kid saw two men pass the window, "That's the town marshal! And he sure was giving you the up and down."

"Who's the other fellow?"

"They calls him Nebraska Slim. He's from the Texas Bad Lands, mostly I reckon; and he don't herd much around here; but I seen him last year, or the year before, with Black Pete."

"Oh," murmured the Kid. "Podner, I thanks you for what you said and I reckon you'd do me a good turn, wouldn't you?"

"Say, I ain't been a cowtown bartender for twenty years not to know men from minks. You may be bad, and that marshal may be a-wanting you, but he ain't the Gospel according to St. John his own self, and all the time he's wearing that star he's cheating a good suit of striped clothes from covering his body. What you want?"

"Over at the livery is my roan horse. Would you mind slipping a saddle on his back and leading him outside to the hitchrack? Here's two dollars to pay that night man, over there."

"As soon as I finish this Sally Lund I'm on my way. But when you gets out of here you drop in and see me at the Silver Front. Maybe I'll pick up some news that might do you good. Anyways I'll give you directions how to trail after leaving town and maybe a name or a note of some kind."

The bartender walked casually from the hotel. The Kid saw him entering the livery as he was finishing his dessert. When he paid his bill he noticed that the roan was bridled and saddle and standing at the hitching rack. Across the street the marshal leaned against a building front, alone. From where he stood he could not have seen the bartender enter or leave the stable. Now he was watching the Kid through the large windows which covered the front of the hotel's lobby.

THE KID rolled a cigarette and when five minutes had passed he stepped to the front door and walked about twenty feet to the Silver Front. Entering this he strode to the far end of the bar where the bartender stood awaiting him, eager to talk.

"I gotta talk fast," he said. "They're laying for you and the whole town knows it. There's just two of 'em,

though. Nebraska is one and the marshal is the other. They've spread the alarm that you're wanted, dead or alive, for a shooting at Vegas; and they intend to get you according to their lights. When you leave here romp due southwest until you raise a big bunch of sharp pointed sand hills. You'll be able to see these, in this moon, and when you do, turn to your left and angle off from their south end about five miles. You'll come to a square shooting cowman there what won't allow this marshal or no posse to take you off his place. Here's a note to him. He'll edge you on west with other notes to his friends and there you are. Kid, did you know the man you shot in Vegas?"

"Nope, I just didn't have time to see his face. Did I kill him?"

"It's a wonder you didn't, for you creased him along his temple, says the marshal, and come within a quarter inch of salivating him complete. His name was Omaha Mose. And he's so bad he has to hold a gun on hisself when he shaves. Why them bullets don't go where they ought is always a wonder to me."

"These men a-looking at me, are they liable to pot shoot me as I go out this door?" the Kid glanced about the room.

"Kid, this place don't attract friends of that marshal's or of Black Pete and Nebraska knows better than to lope in here."

"How's the best way to walk my feet to my horse?"

"Wait a minute till I sends out somebody to see where them civet cats is laying."

The bartender sped away and talked to a man near the rear door who opened the door and stepped outside. As the Kid noted this, two men who had been standing near him sidled over and leaned on the bar.

"Have a drink?" one of them asked.

"No, thank you," smiled the Kid.

"Better take a snort to speed you up!"

"I works cold stone sober in a jamb."

"We've sent 'em word not to shoot you down like a dog."

"Thanks, old-timer, that'll sure help. If they don't get me when I'm not looking maybe I'll be able to put this town back of me and not disgrace it any."

The bartender walked up.

"I reckon some of us boys better stroll along with you to your bronc,"

"Wait till I knows where they are," said the Kid. "If I've got a chance to whittle down one of them fellas I'll sure shoot it out with the other. Boys, this is a lone hand I'm playing, and all I want you-all to do is to stay inside till they knocks me to my knees. After that you can stop the shooting. I didn't do no wrong in Vegas, and I don't aim to be rode back there and sure-enough butchered before I gets there. I knows who's after me and I'd rather have a she-bear coming at me in her den than be put into the hands that is trying to snare me. Mighty kind of you-all but it might get you in trouble."

The bartender hurried toward the man he had sent to spy on the street. A moment he talked then rushed to the Kid.

"They're not on the main street," he said. "My man just told me that he thinks Nebraska is over under the watering trough, but the marshal can't be seen, no place. However, where your bronc is tied, the way's clear and there's nobody on that street a-tall."

"Thanks, old hand," said the Kid stuffing the note the bartender had given him in a pocket. "And thanks to you boys, too," he added to the men he had been talking with. He pulled down the brim of his hat, hitched up his belt a bit, looked around the room and then walked to the door. "Here's where I makes my flying start," he said, quickly stepping outside.

THE street was vacant! From three dance halls not a sound could be heard. Faces were pressed against glass-fronts, and over these were spreading ridiculous expressions of fear, anxiety and amaze. The moon was up and already purple shadows lurked in dim corners. His clicking boots sounded like a roaring noise in his ears. His gun seemed to hit his leg with every stride. His eyes were sweeping everywhere but behind him, and his brain was working at an exhausting rate. His heart pounded and his throat literally throbbed; but on he walked, even in his stride, his gun hand held a bit ahead and above his forty-five's butt.

His breath came deeply as he passed The Cinderella.

He imagined he was in the proximity of some being. He actually trembled a bit. And a vast constriction, due to fright or suspense, or anticipation, assailed him. He shook this off. Now he walked into a shadow and it seemed to him pitch dark. His feet groped for a footing though they were upon a level surface. And then—

His hearing, attuned to a high pitch, concentrated upon a vagrant sound. It stunned his mind, that faint noise. And it seemed to echo throughout him. Where did it come from? There was no one on the street, save himself. But there it was, that shuffling, muffled scraping. It ceased just as he swept the opposite sidewalk.

His psychic qualities prompted the suggestion that a hand was about to clutch his sleeve and up flew his arm as though to resist the touch. It persisted; and try as he would to throw his eyes up to the end of the street, where he knew the watering trough lay, they would involuntarily return to the part of the street across from his position.

Gurrrr! Qwkkkk! Gurrrh! Qwkkk!

There it came again! That sound was magnified now until it had become a roaring mockery which cried out constantly, *"Find me! Find me! Find me! Why don't you find me?"*

"Why don't one of them fellas shoot?" mused the Kid.

A wheezing laugh, ending in a quavering whirr of sound came to the Kid's ears as he breasted a window full of faces. The door to that building was slightly ajar and the Kid heard a low remark which trailed the gurgle of involuntary mirth.

"Them fellas is skeered to open up, ain't they?" a man said.

Exactly as though that expression had been the cue for the drama to begin, the Kid's overwrought senses, which had been frightfully strained for the last fifty feet of his walk, now calmed. And with his serenity of mind came a thoroughness of comprehension. Whoever was in that street, behind those windows, or under that—yes, under that—! Something was moving, over there!

He caught the glint of a moonbeam on a mobile object.

And it was under a stringer of the sidewalk which at this point must have been ten inches high. Again came a shimmer, a tinsel of reflected light and after this the *sound* once more. Ha! the Kid knew it, *now*. He sure did. It was a loose board and it was working up from the walk. And up it did come.

Up and up and up with a niggardly movement that would have defied ordinary sight. Now the sound of the board's creaking ended.

The Kid's mind was devoting itself to his eyes.

The board was tilted more than an inch above its fellows, on the end nearest to the Kid, as he jumped back of a ten-by-ten post, holding up a covered store porch, and whipped out his gun. Then he cried derisively into that crackling silence.

"Shove up that board and crawl out

of there! I'm giving you a split second, brother!"

THE board literally flew against a building front. A man arose from he black depths beneath the walk and as his hands came into the air a gun fell into the street. It was the marshal, and the gray-green of the moonlight, on his blanched and fear-stricken features caused him to appear as though his countenance had been smeared with a phosphorescent paste.

"Walk over here and get in front of me," ordered the Kid.

Up the street he marched the marshal in this position. At the watering trough he cried again. "Come out of that, Nebraska, and come a-fogging, too. If you don't I'm moving this John Law in front of me till I gets a good shot at you."

"I was just looking on," said Nebraska standing erect. "See, I ain't got no gun!" The Kid recalled having seen the man in Vegas.

"Stoop down and throw it out," commanded the Kid. Nebraska stooped and out came a black, long-barreled Colt flying through the air and falling at the Kid's feet.

"Now both you babies get ahead of me!" The two obeyed.

They were walked to the Kid's roan, which he mounted, and with the Kid in the saddle back of them they were forced to lead the way down a long tree-fringed street. Here they were faced about and ordered to run back to town. They lost no time.

Then the Texas Kid gave the roan its head and touched it with a spur. Toward morning he rode up to the ranchhouse to which the bartender had directed him. Here he was put to bed and ordered to sleep. A sense of complete relief came to him, and with this a released flood of emotion. He was nothing but a boy, and as he experienced the kindliness and concern for his safety in that ranchhouse, his pent-up nature overflowed in a silent weeping.

It was late afternoon when he awoke.

He wanted to forge on again, but the rancher would not hear of it. A man had gone to town and when he returned that would be time enough to settle the hour of the Texas Kid's departure. And so that day passed; and another. The third day the rider who had gone to Alamogordo returned. What he had to say to the ranch owner the Kid did not hear, but when the owner turned to the Kid there was a kindly twinkle in his eye.

"Kid," he said, "if you wants to stay on here with me there ain't no reason why you can't. Alamogordo ain't got no more marshal now than a prairie dog town. What you did to them babies was too much by four times four. The town held a meeting the very night you left and it give that marshal and Nebraska just two hours to hit the grit. They went, what I mean. What kept you from killing them two?"

"I ain't no killer," replied the Kid. "I'm just a sunbaked jaybird what is trying to live to be twenty-five. It looks now as if I'll have to make a record to do it, though."

"The time will come when you'll wish you had salivated both of them jaspers. You know, Texas, it's one thing to shoot it out with a hombre, and another thing to make a whole border laugh at him. From this time on out, until you put them fellas away, they'll always be a quicksand, where you're liable to bog down any time you run into 'em."

"Does anybody know which way they headed?"

"I think back to Vegas, at least they loped out of town to the north."

"Well, sir, cap'n," smiled the Kid, "I'll accept your offer of a job and if you don't pay me no wages I'll still be owing you a dern' sight more'n I can ever whittle down."

"You get over into that bunkhouse and meet the boys! But if you've got any money don't sit in at that poker game. Them pot hounds plays deuces wild, Texas, and sixes, sevens and eights is good for any mating of any kind of flush."

"Shucks," laughed the Kid, "you don't have to tell me to keep shet of poker. I'm the world's best bad poker player and when I gets anything bigger than a pair of fours my face becomes as imminent as a cornered skunk. If I gets threes I'm Jerking Jim."

The Kid walked to the low roofed building where the boys were housed and here he met them all.

From that time on he worked the cows for his new boss until the last of May. The spring roundup over, and the cattle shoved back on high summer feed grounds, the Kid decided that he was too near to the region where Black Pete and his gang were wont to travel. Then he recalled what Cool Herbert and the old man, Jackson Tilton, had told him of Paradise gold fields. He decided he would ride out that way and take a slant at the landscape.

The day after he set forth, upon looking out of his blankets at the break of a splendid dawn, he suddenly recalled that another birthday had rolled around. Exultantly he exclaimed.

"Hallo, old First Of June! How is you-all? Twenty-Two! I'm daggoned if I ain't beginning to feel that this here thing of living is a pretty tough old game, after all. It sure takes a lot of figuring for a boy to keep on drawing his breath, seems like."

The roan, ears and head up, eyes centered on the Kid's form, gave a delightful little nicker and went back to eating grass.

"West," mused the Kid. "West, over the Rio Grande to Lordsburg and then get my directions north. Golly, but I sure like June!"

CHAPTER III

Dead Fingers

THERE it lay, Lordsburg, in the pale waning moonlight.

Its lights glittered, yellow and vicious. Some hunch decided the Kid against riding into the village. He made up his mind to set a course due north and gazed at the heavens for a sight of the Big Dipper and Polaris. Finding what he wanted he swung the roan around and started for the hills. Presently he struck a road.

From a squat adobe came the sound of a concertina, after he could no longer see Lordsburg, and from a sheepskin window struggled a miserable light. Mexicans! Here was a chance for a rest and a feed for his bronc. Dismounting, he walked to a draped gunny sack which acted as a door and tapped against the dried mud wall. "Come in!" answered a voice in Spanish.

The Kid entered and saw a lone old man sitting beside a table. In his hands was a concertina. "Could I find a bed and some horse feed with you, *compadre?*" asked the Kid. "I'm tired."

"To such as I have, those who ride are welcome," replied the old man. "My chili is in the pot; I've grain in a bag, back of the house; and there's clean straw in the corner."

"Gracias," smiled the Kid. He unsaddled the roan, stabled it in a brush leanto, fed it and then walked back into the house. He ate ravenously of the peppery food and crawled into bed. At his side slept the old man. Later, the Kid awoke. Horsemen were passing. Came a loud and bitter laugh and then a torrent of words.

"The damned old weasel, if I get a chance—say! Him and Cool Herbert, too! If I could get a chance—one little chance!"

No mistaking that voice. *Black Pete!*

A surge of joy ran through the Kid. The hunch he had had about Lordsburg had sure been a good one. Black Pete had been there.

The voices of the horsemen thinned to mere whispering echoes and then died. The old Mexican snored on.

In the morning the Kid shod the roan with new plates and as he worked he pumped the old man on road directions to Paradise Mountains. Toward noon he set out, ambling along, sometimes off the road, always on the high ground, or watching the high ground, for he did not want to ride into Black Pete's gang.

A week passed and then ten days.

He was west of San Marcial. A greaser or two, met on the road, had told him this much. But the trail he was traveling was singularly free of any kind of travelers. The eleventh day, after leaving the old Mexican's adobe, the Kid had topped a set of high hills as the sun went down. Staring down the west slope of this range he saw a valley.

"Lord, but ain't that pretty?" he mused.

With the last rays of the sun he discovered a group of buildings and set a course for them, at once. But the downgoing was slow and it was after nine o'clock before he made out a twinkle of light far ahead. Toward this he loped; the roan eager for the feed it sensed ahead.

Then came an open gate before a brilliantly lighted house, the veranda of which was ablaze with a burst of illumination from two rooms behind large French windows. The Kid dismounted, dropped the reins to the ground, and allowed the roan to crop the heavy grass back of a thick bush which screened it from the house. He was on the verge of shouting a "hallo!" to the open windows, when he thought he heard a curious sound. This silenced him.

He ran hurriedly to the house and up the steps of the veranda, and just as he ascended to the porch floor he saw a hand gripping the side of a window. That hand held his eyes. It was broad, flat, thick, muscular to a great degree; but the fingers! Those stubby, gnarled, twisted, short, and repulsive fingers! The nails were wide and revolting in their dirtiness and were speckled with blood-like spots beneath them. Truly that hand bewitched him. And there it was, with its hairy wrist, and a part of a forearm, bathed in the light that fell upon it like a calcium spot. *And it changed from blood red to dirty purple and then back to repulsive crimson as if by devilish magic.*

The Kid moved! And the hand vanished. Then he saw a shadow stir across the floor of a room; heard a rush of footsteps, and beheld a form dart through a draped doorway.

INSTINCTIVELY he backed down the steps. What he had witnessed didn't appeal to him. Clearly the sound of his step on that veranda had frightened the owner of that gruesome hand.

With the vision of those detestable fingers lingering in his brain he walked from the stone steps and hurried silently to the grass. Here, as he moved toward his horse, he caught sight of a man at a side window.

And in his hands was a rifle. Was he this *other* man?

Now the fellow was dropping that gun and taking a bead.

"Hi, you!" yelled the Kid.

To late! The gun cracked just as he had cried. But the Kid didn't wait! With a bound he cleared some flower beds and then pulled his gun as the man in front of the window started to run.

"Drop it!" commanded the Kid. And the rifle fell to the grass. "Now we'll walk into this house," added the Kid.

Shoving the man before him he moved

toward the front of the veranda, and while passing a lighted area the Kid got a look at his captive's face. He saw the man was a Mexican.

"Hombre," he said, "climb them steps and don't go too fast."

On the veranda he stopped the man and turned him around.

"Let me see your hands," he said. Out came the Mexican's hands. These were shapely, small, almost beautiful hands.

"Where's your pardner?"

"I have no pardner, I am alone. There was none but me and him."

"What him?"

"The one at which I fired. The one I killed. He's inside of that room, seated at his desk. I killed him because —"

"You sabe that I'll shoot you as soon as your pals try to get me, don't you? You better holler to them not to try anything cute."

"There are no men around here. No one, but the dead man. This is a holiday up at Paradise and all the hands and servants are gone. Because of this I came tonight. I knew he was alone."

"Go into that room."

The Mexican walked ahead. Then, from the shadowy regions, behind the log house, there came the sounds of a running horse tearing out of the yard. Somewhere a man was riding away.

"What's that?" cried the Mexican.

"Keep on a-going," ordered the Kid.

Through a large room they went, into another, and there, seated at a desk, in line with the open window through which the Mexican had fired, the Kid beheld the figure and head of an old man. The head had fallen forward on the man's folded left arm, the right arm had dropped to his side.

Looking down at the man the Kid saw a small hole through his left ear. Instinctively his eyes looked from that hole toward the log wall behind it. And as he stared he started. For there, in a polished log, he saw a small bullet hole.

"Where did you aim?" asked the Kid.

"At his head, back of the left ear," answered the Mexican. Then he roused. "God," he cried, "there's my bullet hole in his ear. I must have jerked as I heard your cry. I didn't hit his head! There isn't a wound, except in that ear."

The Kid continued to stare at the man's head. Then he thrilled.

The ear was not bleeding.

"Mother of God!" he heard the Mexican whimpering at his side. "I didn't kill him. I didn't!—I didn't!—then who—? Señor! What made you ask me where my companion was?"

"Wait a minute," said the Kid.

Why was not that ear wound bleeding? Why was there no blood on the man's neck? Was it because the wound had not started to flow as yet?

"God, look!" exclaimed the Mexican. "There on the floor, under him!"

The Kid lowered his eyes to the floor and beheld a great pool of blood directly under the chair.

THE sight appalled him. He must do something with his prisoner while he examined the corpse seated in the chair; for now the conviction had come to him that he was gazing upon a man who had been dead some time.

"Drop down on your face, stretch out your arms and stay that way. The minute you move I throw a slug at you."

The Mexican flattened face down on the floor.

The Kid raised the head of the dead man by its thin white hair and let it fall. The feel of the flesh was cold and clammy. Rigor mortis had already begun to set in. Then he stared at the left hand of the corpse. Near it was a pen. The man had been writing when killed, for on the forefinger were stains of ink.

"Was he writing when you shot?" he asked the Mexican.

"He was then, as he is now. I thought him asleep."

The Kid turned the head and stared at the face of the corpse.

A shock raced through him as he recognized the features of Jackson Tilton, the handsome old man who had covered his flight as he rode away from Cool Herbert's saloon in Las Vegas.

With gentle care he raised the body and straightened it in its chair. And as he propped it upright he detected the bone handle of a knife protruding from under the front, left armpit of the form. The handle was tilted a bit toward the body and perceptibly told that whoever had driven that blade had sent the knife home from behind the chair.

The Kid tried to pull out the blade. It did not budge.

Then the fingers and the hand which he had seen at the front windows flashed into his brain. That monstrous hand and those ape-like fingers had shot that blade so deeply into the old body that the hilt was now bedded in the flesh.

He examined the right hand, now hanging along the chair. The fist was closed, but something was held in its grip. He pried open the fingers and removed a crumpled sheet of paper from them. This he straightened out and read. The handwriting was exquisite. But the message that his mind read, in those few lines, sent his brain reeling.

Covertly he tucked the paper inside of a pocket. Then he looked at a blotter on the desk. A big, square blotter it was, and on it he thought he saw some writing in reverse. The Mexican stirred. "May I speak, señor?" he asked.

"Yes, go ahead," answered the Kid.

"I think someone has been here and succeeded in doing what I came to do," he said. "And now he has escaped on a horse."

"What was it you came here to do?"

"Discover where this old man keeps his secret of the lost mine of my people. My family took gold from these hills for years. Then a generation which had plenty of wealth moved to Spain and the secret of that mine was lost. My father claimed his father gave the location to an old Mexican who was to come here and work the mine. That man vanished after leaving Hermosillo and no trace of him has ever been found."

"What makes you think that Mister Tilton knew of this mine?"

"One of his cowboys once came into Paradise with an old pick. It was a Spanish pick and on its side was the mark of my grandfather. I asked him where he got it and he said it belonged to Jackson Tilton who had found it in the old Spanish diggings."

"But does that give you cause to shoot a man like you would a roosting chicken?"

"I, myself, saw that pick, in the blacksmith shop where it was being sharpened. I went to this dead man and told him of my family and asked him to lead me to the hole where he had found the pick. Instead he laughed at me. Just laughed in my face."

"Did you think he was a-going to give you a gold mine because you said you wanted one?"

"I was willing to share with him, but I wanted what belonged to my people. He put me off, and then I saw him bring into Paradise a great box filled with nuggets. The sight made me crazy. I knew that in this house was a safe. I felt that in that safe the old man kept the secret of his mine and I planned to kill him, search that safe and locate that gold. But some one beat me to the secret."

"I think," said the Kid, "that maybe you're wrong. I think I see something on this blotter that will interest you."

The Mexican's head jerked around and he stared into the Kid's eyes. "What blotter?" he asked wildly. "May I see it?"

"Get up and bring it to that looking glass and hold it close to it. I'll take down what I read."

THE Mexican leaped to his feet, caught up the blotter and, holding it within a few inches of a wall mirror, quickly read these lines in the same handwriting as the note the Kid had removed from the dead fingers. The Kid penciled on a small piece of paper the words he saw, right-side up, in a glass:

The lost Spanish mine is located up Right Hand Creek where it meets Apache Fork. Here is a Chimney Stone and part way up this, a cave. Forty feet back in cave is where I found the rocks seamed with gold. The nuggets, I picked up below Chimney Rock.

The Kid smiled, seemed inwardly amused at the impression the writing had made on the Mexican.

"You got it, didn't you?" he asked tucking the blotter under his riding vest.

"Yes," answered the man, actually licking his dried lips.

"A lot o' good it'll do you. Come on, we're Paradise bound, and you'll be Heaven bound in a little while; maybe to that other place. You gotta horse around here?"

"Yes, back of the water house."

After making the Mexican a prisoner on his own horse the Kid climbed into his saddle and trailed him into Paradise. He turned the prisoner over to the undersheriff, who was also the jailer, but this night the jail was empty. Paradise was docile.

The undersheriff was startled at the news of Jackson Tilton's murder. He was surly, almost insulting, to the Kid. But he searched and jailed the greaser. "Now," he said, piercing the Kid with a curious look, "tell me what you saw, heard, smelt and felt."

The Kid told him of the condition of Tilton's body, of seeing the Mexican shoot through the window, of the hole in the ear and the log, of the form he had seen running through the house, of the writing on the blotter. But for some reason he made no mention of the note found in Tilton's hand or of the repulsive fingers.

"The sheriff's at Gumbo," said the undersheriff. "I'll send him word to get to Tilton as fast as he can. You can go, now!"

After stabling the roan the Kid walked into Paradise. He was glad he had not told the undersheriff what that blotter contained.

CHAPTER IV

Black Pete Grins

THERE was a low, long hum in the air.

Paradise was awake. "Awake all over," to put the expression in the language of an old prospector who was exhorting a crowd in front of "The Long Island" as the Kid sauntered casually down the street.

"Here she is, boys!" he was crying, his long whiskers waving with his swaying body, "Step over this way and listen to my howl! Forty years in this desert, and thirty back in the States, and I can crack both heels in the air, twice, before I hit the ground! Whoopee! Pop, goes the weasel!" Up he went into the air and his boot heels clicked twice before he struck nimbly on his toes. "Come on, you dust-throated pilgrims, pile in back of Old Jimmy and he'll sympathize with your thirst and he sure won't do you wrong. I've just found a pocket what is choked with golden wheat! Look at that!"

Out came a long buckskin poke from the recesses of his formidable coat. It

had been tied to his body, around the shoulders, as a sling. For all the world it suggested a weight of over seventy-five pounds. The crowd gasped. Then it made a rush and Old Jimmy was surged into the saloon where his thin squealing voice could be heard high above the hilarity of his fellows.

"Beats riding for a cow outfit," mused the Kid. "I wonder if Cool Herbert was lying to me, back in Vegas?" He stopped a miner, "Say, pard," he asked, "is there a saloon man in this town called Cool Herbert—a sorta long, thin, bed-slat built lunger with deep staring eyes, no wind, and a right kindly looking smile?"

"And a muzzle-loading shotgun?" asked the man.

"Yep! That sure is him! Where is he?"

"Yonder's his place. 'The Square Deal'!"

The Kid edged away to the resort and entered it. The place was jammed with patrons and alive with movement and discordant sound; but over all, and through all, one obtained the impression that here was good nature, in the meaning of mining camps, and rugged honesty, in every quarter of the house. Cool Herbert was not visible.

"Keno!" a voice cried the word in utter exultation.

"The son of a gun!" voiced another man. "That's twice he's done that, straight running."

"Cards!" shrilled a keno dealer. "Two bits a card, gents! And the prize is big. Twenty-five dollars! Come on! Hi, you! Cowboy! You, coming down, thisaway? Will ya have a card?"

He was talking to the Kid. "I don't care if I do," said the Kid failing in his glance to see Cool Herbert and thinking this was a way to get a lay of the land before asking for the proprietor.

He hurried to a table and bought three cards. And while the play was being started a banjo in a corner thrummed and a man's tenor voice rang sweetly through the room.

Oh, honey, where you been so long?
Oh, honey, where you been so long?
I've been in the bend,
With the rough and rowdy men,
And I'm going back again, 'fore long.

Oh, you can call me bum, when I'm gone.
Oh, you can call me bum, when I'm gone.
But when you see me coming,
With my pockets full of gold,
Then it's honey where you been so long?

The Kid was transported by the excitement and the madness of mirth about him; and stunned by the lavish display of yellow gold on every side. Gold! Gold! Gold! the very atmosphere seemed to hang heavy with it. Filled pokes! Nuggets! Bags of dust! Hunks of high grade, free milling ore, and everywhere, smiles, laughter and riotous fun. Here two men were trying to pin each other's shoulders to the dirt of the floor for the privilege of buying. It was "the winner buys," and these two were testing by combat for that right.

OVER there a man was tracing in the saloon floor's dust the exact location of his claim, and showing how the float which he had picked up had led him back to what he called the "mother lode." And then Cool Herbert appeared. He walked out of a side room carrying a tremendous sprinkling pot. Smiling at the ruffians rolling on the earthern floor he cried, "Get up, you walruses! I want to wet down this dance floor. We're a-going to do the rye waltz here, in a minute."

The two men jumped up. One had

dusted his companion's shoulders and now was declared endowed with the right to buy a drink for the men who lined that bar. Cool sprayed the floor with water and a moist freshness came into the room.

"Twenty-one!" yelled a man picking up small wooden balls out of a "goose" which had a narrow circular neck like a powder horn. When the "goose" was spun a ball was taken from its throat and the number on that ball read. Each player had three or more cards before him, each card bearing a number, and these pegged on a blackboard as cards paid-for and in-play, and as a number was called players covered it, if it appeared on their cards, with a button. The first player to get five numbers in a horizontal row shouts "keno" and wins the pool for that game. Now the numbers were being called for the game in which the Texas Kid sat. "Nineteen! Thirty! Seventy-six! Four! Two! Eighteen! Eighty-eight! Five."

Cool Herbert looked down the room and saw the features of the Kid. Something like a gleam of joy flicked his smoky eyes. "The son of a gun he sure ain't 'fraid of thin ice!" he mused and walked toward the table.

"Forty-four! Sixty-seven! Eee-leven! Fifty nine!"

"Keno!" cried the Kid. "I sure kenoed!"

The keno was correct, the card had been paid for and pegged, and the Kid given the pool. It amounted to a little over twenty-six dollars. The spirit of the game had entered into his marrow. But at the instant when play was about to resume Cool Herbert looked across the table. The Kid's eyes wrinkled into an expression of delight.

"Boy, howdy!" he cried. "I sure gave your house a cheating that time. Now I craves to talk, all this money's worth, right into your ear. Where can I and you perch, for a flock of minutes?"

"Come on, kid," said Cool. "Into my sanctified sanatorium. If you was old Ugly Himself, and had just finished a round trip from Hades I couldn't be more pleased to touch flesh with you. Gimme that paw!" They moved away. And sat down back of a door in a windowless log walled room cribbed with upright compartments in which were piles of pokes and bags of gold dust.

"If that's gold, man," said the Kid, "I don't see how you can sleep. I'd be so nervous, taking care of that much yellow muck, that I wouldn't never close more'n one eye at a time. How much you got in here?"

"Yesterday there was a little better than fifty thousand. But what are you doing here, and what brand of trouble are you running from now? I can see 'talk' just shouting out of your eyes. Now you talk, daggone you, and you talk, a-plenty!"

"Jackson Tilton has been murdered, Cool!"

"Kid, are you kidding me?"

"And I was to run out o' Alamogordo for taking the guns away from the marshal and one of Black Pete's boys called Nebraska. Wasn't that Nebraska the fella what ducked around the corner a second after I creased Omaha Mose?"

"He sure was, and what's more he's in Paradise! But what's this about Jackson Tilton being killed?"

SWIFTLY the Texas Kid recited all that had befallen him since leaving Vegas; and graphically he told what had taken place at the house of Jackson Tilton. When he finished he brought out the blotter and using a mirror placed it so that Cool read its meaning at a glance.

"Good Lord, boy, why you're rich!" he said.

"Wait," answered the Kid. "Read this thing! I took it out of the old man's

fingers. Just read that!"

Cool Herbert's glance flew over the crumpled sheet Jackson Tilton had clutched in death. Then he returned it to the Texas Kid.

"My poor old friend," he moaned. "Why, he never had a chance! Boy, did you say anything to that undersheriff about this?"

"I did not! And I didn't say anything to that Mexican I brought to jail. I told the jailer that I had found a blotter that had a funny message on it, but I didn't tell him what it was."

"You did? Say, you get down to that jail, as fast as your boots will let you go, and you tell that undersheriff you lost that blotter on the way in. Man, you've stuck your head right into a yellow jacket's nest. The sheriff of this county is so crooked he could hide back of a bed spring and he's thicker than fleas with all the bad boys of this valley. Black Pete and his gang is here. Got into town a day or two ago, and this sheriff used to belong to this gang of Mex smugglers down around Lordsburg. It's a cinch that who ever did that knifing of old man Tilton now figgers that he's sure safe. You didn't mention them funny looking fingers, didja?"

"Nope, but I did say I seen a running form, and a shadow, and heard a horse getting away after I caught the Mexican. Why?"

"Never mind; you fly back to the jail and try to muddy the brain of that undersheriff. Don't let them think you know too much, or maybe it'll be close-the-cases on you. If they thought you had what you've shown me—say! You can tell that undersheriff, for the sheriff is out of town, and ain't expected back until late in the morning. Get going, now. I and you've got to ferret this out!"

"Here, Cool, you take these things, and what I means is take care of then. You and I, podner, just you and I and maybe if we can find any heirs of old man Tilton, we'll count them in!"

Cool accepted the blotter, and the sheet of writing the Kid had removed from the dead fingers of the old rancher. Then the Kid hurried into the street. Of a sudden he recalled that the copy of the blotter's message he had written in pencil was as yet in his pocket. He found it and read it as he walked along the street. He stopped, as though in a sudden indecision, stared at the note, was on the point of turning back, then hurried forward stuffing the paper into a chaps' pocket as he hustled away.

At the jail the undersheriff greeted him.

"I've sent word to the sheriff to swing around and return to Paradise by way of the Tilton ranch. The coroner will meet him there and then the inquest can be held and the body buried and all the evidence taken the sheriff will need. Where'll you be in case we want to see you?" He seemed in the grip of some fearful anguish.

"I'll headquarter at The Square Deal and put up at the hotel. But I come back to tell you that on the way into town I lost that derned blotter. And while I seen the shadow of that fellow what was inside the house, and I thought I seen his figure, I've plumb forgot what either one looked like. I don't know whether to tell you-all he was big, little, fat or thin. Now don't that beat three of a kind? I reckon I was excited. I couldn't identify nothing now."

"Never mind," said the undersheriff. "In the daylight we'll get a look at what hoof tracks are left in the yard and maybe that knife will tell us something. You say it's still sticking in the old man's body?"

"Jammed in so far I couldn't pull it out."

"Didn't you tell me that the Mex and you read what was on that blotter?"

"Yep, but I forgets that, too!"

THE eyes of the undersheriff narrowed, and a mocking sneer curled his lips. "Seems to me that a cowboy used to catching one look at a cow or a horse and never forgetting that critter has got kind o' keerless about seeing things what tells of where a real mine can be found." His eyes were searching the Kid's face.

"You gotta figger I was some mussed up in my head. It all happened so quick that it was like a punch and judy show. Daggone me if it don't seem like a dream. There was something about two creeks, and a cave, and forty feet back in this cave. If I was to hear the names of some streams I reckon I could recall what that blotter said. Anyhow, maybe you boys will find it between here and the Tilton ranch. I'm tired out and going to bed. Come for me anytime."

The Kid hurried back to The Square Deal and after telling Cool what he had done and how he had tried to becloud the undersheriff's mind he started for the hotel. On the way he saw Old Jimmy, the lucky prospector who had exposed the enormous sling-poke, walking down the street with two men. The old desert rat was obviously drunk and was obviously being led away from the busy section of town toward the shadowy cabins along the river. The Kid felt an impulse to follow.

Silently he stepped along the opposite side of the street and had reached a point a hundred yards from the main section of town when he saw one of the companions of Jimmy hit the old man across the head. Down went the old miner and his assailants were struggling with the poke and had just jerked it free when the Kid darted to the scene a gun in his hand.

One look at his weapon and the man who had possesion of the poke dropped it and started with his companion away from the scene. That man the Kid thought resembled Nebraska Slim; but he wasn't sure.

"Murder! Help! Boys, they're killing me!" Old Jimmy's voice rang shrilly back to the densely moving crowd that filled the main street. The Kid picked up the poke in his free hand, and was about to stick his gun in his holster when Jimmy, who had dropped to the ground, arose quickly to his feet striking the gun-barrel with his bloody head. Then he went to grips with the Kid. And when a score of men rushed up the Kid was trying to get the old man pacified.

"This is one of 'em," yelled Jimmy "This sure is one of them fellers, boys! They hit me with a gun, see the blood!"

Out came a dozen guns. The Kid found himself covered with weapons from all sides. He started to jam his Colt into its sheath when one of the bystanders grabbed his hand. "No you don't," he said jerking the gun away and staring at its barrel, "this Colt has got blood on its barrel!"

"Take him to jail," yelled Jimmy. "Then you boys come on back with me to The Long Island. Now I'm a-going to stable this dust, for I sees I can't be trusted with it, no more."

The crowd shoved the Kid along despite his protestations that he had been with Cool Herbert and not with Jimmy. When he reached the jail the undersheriff listened to what the crowd had to say and then cast a sneer at the Kid.

"I reckon jail's the best place for you, fella," he said. "You forgets too much. Didn't you think old Jimmy's poke belonged to you?"

"Will some of you boys go tell Cool Herbert what's happened to me?" asked the Kid.

"I'll tell him," answered a member of the crowd.

The Kid was searched and his belongings removed. The copy he had made of the blotter's writing was among

his cigarette papers and was not taken. Then he was led to the cell section and shoved into a long room where sat the Mexican he had caught at Jackson Tilton's home. The greaser turned a malevolent glance in the Kid's direction.

In a short while Cool Herbert appeared and was allowed to speak to the Kid who told him exactly what had happened and how the circumstances arose which had damned him in the eyes of the men who had rushed to the spot in answer to Jimmy's alarm.

Cool Herbert looked perturbed. "It's bad, kid," he said. "It's sure bad. If this Jimmy can't be convinced that you're innocent he may buy so much whiskey for the boys and get them so riled up that they may want to have a necktie party before morning. I'm going up the street and kind o' calm down the town. I knows this Jimmy and maybe I can talk to him and get him to go to bed. If he had been drinking any place but in The Long Island I could get the bartenders to prove that you hadn't walked away with him. But that dump is owned by the sheriff and that means it's tough, all ways. We're in a jack pot, son, and we gotta play this game close to our belt buckle. But if they starts coming here with a rope, why, me and my old shot gun Matilda, with some of my boys, will be sitting in the shade of the jail waiting to welcome 'em."

The night dragged horribly. Day came, and after breakfast, perhaps it was ten o'clock, the Kid heard a loud voice bellowing through the rooms adjacent to the cells. For more than an hour the low murmur of conversation struggled into the room where the Kid sat dejected on a bench. Then a door opened and a deputy sheriff unlocked the cell door and motioned to the Mexican.

"The sheriff wants to talk with you," he said. The Mexican hurried away as the door was shut and locked back of him.

Within an hour he came back. His face was swollen, his lip was split, and his clothes were covered with dust. Like a sack of salt falling from a wagon he dropped on the bench beside the Kid.

When they were alone he whispered.

"They tried to make me tell, señor! Oh, God, how they beat me! Beat me with a piece of rubber hose! And they intend to make *you* talk, if they can."

"How talk?"

"They want to find out what we saw on that blotter, señor! They want to find out the location of the gold mine of my people! Don't tell!"

"I don't remember," answered the Kid.

"But the copy of that writing? What did you do with that?"

"Shsss! you fool," admonished the Kid. "I done away with that."

"Good! don't tell, señor! We'll get out of this trouble, see if we don't, and then we can locate that gold together."

The Kid wanted to smile, but the groveling condition of the wretch beside him filled him with a loathing. He despised the man, and now for the first time doubted the story he had told him of why he had wanted to kill Jackson Tilton.

But he said nothing and showed by his manner that he did not want further conversation. The Mexican nursed his injuries and at dinner would eat none of the food passed under the door of the cell. At night he was moved to another cell in a far portion of the building.

Alone, miserable beyond understanding, the Kid arose and stared out of his window. He saw that the sheriff's office, courthouse, and jail occupied almost a square block of level land filled with old cottonwood trees. From the town came the raucous jar of curses, cries, laughter and song mived with a hid-

eous music from pianos and horns and concertinas. Then something back of some bushes stirred, assumed definite human shape and darted to the jail's wall. The Kid saw another image, then another, and these followed the first. They had disappeared further down the wall and he could not see where they had gone. After a moment he heard the soft whine of a saw on iron. His seething mind followed every passage of that hacksaw blade. And as the tone changed, indicating that the sharp steel teeth were now embedding themselves more deeply in whether they were sawing, the thought flashed to him that he was about to witness an attempted jail delivery.

COULD it be possible that others in that building could not hear as well as he? No! He was at an open window. The sheriff's office was arranged on the opposite side of the building.

Crack!

Unmistakably that was a broken bar. The sawing continued. Fifteen, thirty, forty minutes went by. Then—

Crack! Crack!

Two more bars had been jerked loose. Back rushed the forms to the shadowy shelter of the bushes and after these a third figure raced. The Kid knew that shape. No mistaking that.

It was the young Mexican he had caught at Jackson Tilton's home.

"Why that was easy," he mused. "Right back of them cottonwoods is the river bank, and below that a fellow could ride a horse and maybe he could get all the way out of town without showing hisself. That river's deep enough where it cuts through this level stretch. Yep, you couldn't see horses leave if they walked up that bottom."

A footstep sounded. A tall brutal-visaged man entered and unlocked the Kid's cell. "I'm the sheriff," he said, "come on. I wants to talk with you."

"There's been an escape," said Jimmy. "That Mexican just got away."

"What? How do you know?"

"I saw three fellows slip up to my wall and then I heard a saw working. It took them just about one hour to cut them bars. Now they're down in the river bed, somewheres."

"All right, I'll get to tailing them, but you mosey ahead of me and don't try no monkey business."

"Chief," said the Kid, "you've got me all wrong! I never had a thing to do with Jimmy's poke. I was trying to help him. Does you know a bird called Nebraska Slim?"

The sheriff looked startled.

"Sure," he said peering into the Kid's eyes. Then slowly he asked, "What about him?"

"He was one of the fellas what was beating up on Jimmy. And it was him who had jerked the poke loose as I rushed over, my gun out, and chased them off. What I oughta done was to have busted a cap right then."

"You've busted too many caps, son. Now you're done. Just shove open that door and walk inside that room. We want you to tell us something."

The Kid opened a door and stopped dead in his tracks.

Inside the room he was about to enter he saw the sneering faces of Black Pete, two deputies, Nebraska, Omaha Mose and the marshal of Alamogordo. The undersheriff was there also. The Kid was so surprised that he involuntarily retreated. But a hard small object was pressed against his spine and he heard a rasping voice say, "Keep on going till you gets to that chair on the other side of the room."

The Kid walked through the door and sat down in the chair.

"I reckon in this gathering I've got about as much chance as a fawn, two weeks old, at a coyotes' picnic," he said.

Black Pete's face broke into a diabolical grin.

CHAPTER V

THE KID HEARS A VOICE

FOR a miserable moment the silence in the room struck terror to the boy. Then, as he stared from face to face, and saw the hideous looks of avarice, blood lust and hate, which filled them, it seemed to him so ludicrous that unconsciously he smiled.

"Do you know me?" asked the sheriff. "They calls me Lordsburg Little 'cause I bends a bronc's back with an even two hundred and fifty pounds of raw meat. Didja ever hear of how I tames crooks?"

"Nope," said the Kid, "this is my first time this far west. But I've heard that you was so sin-warped you couldn't lay down in a water trough. Why ain't you romping on the trail of that greaser? I brought evidence to this jail and you lets it fly out a window."

Several of the men in the room casually glanced at the sheriff.

"What's he mean?" asked the undersheriff.

"Go ahead," laughed Little, "and tell the boys what you told me." The Kid wondered where Rowdy Evans was. "Go on!" growled Little.

The Kid described the escape.

"You go see," said Lordsburg Little to the undersheriff. "Maybe that Mex did vamoos." Nebraska's face was trying to hide a smile.

The undersheriff hurried from the room and came back on the run.

"He's gone!" he cried, "and they's three bars sawed off clean."

While he exclaimed the news in a loud voice there was something in his manner that evidenced the fact that the discovery was no surprise to him.

"Got get some of the boys," the sheriff said, in a chilly tone," and tail them greasers. If you herds them into a corner pump 'em full of lead. This jail won't hold no more till I gets some new bars." The undersheriff walked out of the room.

"Now," said Little, "you tells all us boys what you seen and heard out at Jackson Tilton's place."

The Texas Kid studied the sheriff, stared about the room. There was Nebraska, and Omaha Mose who had a long white scar below his temple, evidencing the Kid thought, the path where his bullet had traveled in front of Cool's bar in Las Vegas. The hands of the men in the room held the boy's attention. At each one he stared. But nowhere did he see what he was looking for.

"Well," said Black Pete, "ain't you gonna talk?"

"I aims to do my talking to a judge and jury. You fellas has something particular to ask me, so lead your ace"

He was trying to get a good look at Lordsburg Little's fingers. Then the hands flashed up from Lordsburg's side. These were not the fingers he had seen at the ranch of the murdered man. No, they were hideous things, these fingers, but not so monstrous as those other digits. And they were not blood red and purple streaked.

"What kind o' fella was it you saw as you stepped on that porch, out there." Little's face was a study in vileness.

"I didn't see him right well. Only his back and shadow."

"Could you identify his face, or his figger?"

"I wouldn't like to do that. I ain't certain."

"What was on that blotter. You read it to the Mex, what was on it?"

"I forgets about that."

"You got pals in this town?"

"Nobody but you boys and Cool Herbert. I was coming over to see Jackson Tilton. That's what brought me this way."

"What was you a-reading when you walked down the street on your way to this jail, I means when you came back here?"

At the query the Kid evinced a startled amaze. How had Little learned this? Then he gloated. He was glad that the note was on his person. Now, without a doubt, he would be searched and the blotter's secret would become the property of this gang.

"If I was to tell you that, Lordsburg Little, you'd know as much about it as I does. That's a sort o' secret between I and myself. And I wraps it up in my brain and there it stays. Shoot your other barrel. You missed me with that one."

LITTLE flew out of his chair like a panther and his hands gripped the Kid's shoulders and circled his throat like the coils of a giant constrictor. Several times the huge form above him swayed and tilted and then the room went dark and objects in it blurred to the Kid's sight. The fingers of Lordsburg Little were shutting off his wind. He heard a great booming in his ears and then heard Black Pete laugh.

"Look out, you fool," he said, "you've got that kid dern near dead, right now."

The Kid was hurled back into his seat. His throat burned and his head throbbed, but his vision cleared and his pounding heart seemed to cease its terrific beat. He swallowed, instinctively, and at the rise and fall of his gorge a dead, inward agony pulsed in his neck. Truly that monstrous brute before him had nearly snapped out his life with those bone-cracking fingers.

"Now will you tell me what was on that blotter?" shot Little.

"Good Lord," cried Omaha Mose staring out of the window, "here comes a mob. I'll bet this kid will never tell nothing, if them fellas out there gets a-holt of him."

Lordsburg Little jumped for the window and stared across the vacant grounds before the courthouse. What he saw changed his mind instantly. He swung about and became another being on the second.

"We can't let them fellas hang you, Kid," he said. "Now you tell me what it was you saw on that blotter and I'll take you out the other side of this building and put you safe in my home."

The Kid, unable to speak, smiled. Then shook his head in a negative. At this instant Rowdy Evans stalked into the room.

Again that maniacal gleam came to Little's eyes. And then the Kid saw a significant look flash between Nebraska and Black Pete. Accompanying this he also saw Nebraska Slim indicate with his head that he wanted Little to leave the room. That look, and the movement of that head conveyed instantly to the Kid that Nebraska Slim wanted the Texas Kid to be left alone with him and Black Pete in that room. Black Pete caught the desire at once.

"Lordsburg," he said. "Let us boys take this Texas Kid over in the court room, while you shows the ring-leaders of the mob them sawed bars where the Mexican got out. Tell that gang this kid and the greaser escaped and had help on the outside. We'll gag this hombre and choke what we want out of him."

It was evident that this suggestion pleased the sheriff.

"Go ahead," he said. "But move fast! That gang is only a hundred feet from here, now. I'll close the doors and hold the boys back while you get this bird out of here. Take him into that little room down the hall where the judge keeps his records. It's quiet in there.

But don't let him squeak. One squeak and this mob—"

The Kid smiled. "Squeak?" he mused. "I should say not. Not a peep outa me." Then aloud, "I don't want to be lynched, do I?"

Black Pete and his men hustled the Kid down the hall and into a small room filled with a desk, several chairs and a number of letter files and large ledger-type record books.

"Now you begin to sputter what we wants to know," hissed Black Pete. Again the Kid smiled. It was unqualified challenge.

Out of the tail of his eye the Texas Kid saw Nebraska slip back of him. Then he saw a queer wide-eyed expression of amaze fill Black Pete's face.

SOMETHING crashed against his skull sending him to his knees. But consciousness did not leave him. Numb, unable to move; dumb, with a paralysis creeping over his body, he was yet able to register sights and sounds. Then he heard Omaha Mose's voice.

"I saw him reading that note on his way to jail. Then he folded it up, but I didn't see where he put it. Back he come from the jail, me tailing him, to Cool's place. But he never gave away that note. I kept my eye on him all the time."

"Where you suppose he put it?" asked Nebraska.

"It's on him, now," replied Omaha Mose. "The undersheriff never found a thing but some money, his knife and watch. It's just gotta be on him. Let's get it!"

Hands and fast flying fingers dove into all his pockets.

The paralysis was becoming nearly complete. His sight failed. But he heard a murmurous roar. The mob! Now it was in the hall. Now coming toward the room in which he was held. Cries, curses, suggestions surged and bellowed through that makeshift courthouse. "Let's see for ourselves! He won't get away from us! If he escaped we wants to know how!" Then he swooned—

The next he knew he was back in his cell, alone. The door was locked to his compartment, and throughout the building there was no sound. He struggled to his feet. A desire to smoke came to him and he brought out his tobacco and rolled a cigarette. An impulse filled him. Striking another match he lighted a candle on a bench and by its light stared at the contents of his chaps' pockets. The copy of the blotter's message! Where was it?

It was missing! He sat down and smiled. "Black Pete got it," he thought. "And he must of done that when I fainted away."

Pondering his predicament, studying over the flash that had passed between Nebraska and Black Pete, he arrived at a conclusion that Black Pete and his gang had designedly removed him from Little's presence in order to secure that copy of the blotter's information. Why? Why would they want to do this? Wasn't all them fellows in the same gang? Was Lordsburg Little, after all, a straight sort of law officer? Or was it because—?"

"Seeeeeen.....yor!"

A whisper moved through the room.

A mere thread of sound it was; but how it carried to the Kid's ears!

"Seeeeeen. . . . . .yor!"

Again it came, a faint but not an unfamiliar whisper. It was remarkable, nerve-exciting; a pulsing, penetrating mere shell of that word. And was as unreal, as intangible, as a fancied drum beat, heard in a dream. There it was again! Had that crack on his head set him hearing things? Or was it, after all?"

"Seeeeeen.....yor!"

No! It was real! and it was coming from some region outside of his window.

Outside of his window and immediately below it.

HE stood up and placed his head between the bars.

A man's face came out of the shadows, quickly, until it was on a level with his own. Then a bit of candle light fell across the tanned and swarthy features. The Kid had seen that countenance, before! Where?

The man's lips moved. "Señor, don't you know me?"

It was a Mexican! But what Mexican?

"I reckon not," murmured the Kid.

"I'm Pedro Sanchez, the Mexican vaquero you saved at Doan's Store on Red River. Don't you remember? I was the cause for why you haf to run away. I long tam follow you. Now I help. I see you brought here. I know many things. Soon you go get out, dese place. Tak dese gun, señor, and dese shells. If you want for gun you have got heem."

A heavy Colt, swinging to a belt loaded with cartridges, came into the window. The Texas Kid grasped it and jerked it inside his cell.

"Here's note," said Pedro. "Now I must go! *Adios!*"

He vanished and the Kid was left standing in a maze. Between the bars lay a small piece of writing paper. Removing this and sitting down on his bench he hid the belt and gun under a pair of blankets on the floor and glancing at the note he saw these words:

"Be ready along about daylight!
Cool."

He touched the paper to the candle's flame and watched it char to a curling ash as a smile wreathed his face.

With a boot toe he touched the gun which he saw bulging his blanket.

CHAPTER VI

"I SEEN FINGERS"

THE Texas Kid did not relish the passage of the silent moments. These seemed freighted with something more than a dreadful suspense. They carried the weight of a mighty concern to his brain. And twirling his thumbs his racing mind assembled the events of the night in a heavy parade.

Why had the Mexican been permitted to escape so easily?

Why had the undersheriff, Little, Black Pete and the others pretended a surprise? Why had none of Black Pete's men followed that undersheriff away from the scene?

Then he knew, or seemed to know! It became like a thing he had seen. How ridiculous it was. Of course. Now it was as plain as day. Lordsburg Little had been told by the undersheriff what the Kid had confided to him. Both of these men desired to learn what the Mexican knew, and what the Kid knew. Both wanted to find out what had been on that blotter. Both had gone gold-wild.

The best way to learn of this was to liberate that greaser and then follow him to the spot where the Spanish gold lay. That was the quickest way, and that way prevented Black Pete and his men from cutting in on the find. What a diabolical gang!

Funny he hadn't thought of that! But how about Black Pete and his gang, now that they had the blotter's secret? With this that mine could be definitely located and filed upon at once. This would shut Lordsburg Little out of any share. Good! Get these crooks split up and maybe some one of them would talk; but didn't this clearly show that none of Black Pete's men or those of

Little had anything to do with the murder of Jackson Tilton? Of course it did! Now what? Why, if any of these fellows had seen Tilton write that note which had been dried on the blotter then such men would have removed the note and would have known its import. He was confronted with an impenetrable wall of confusion.

But a low rumble of approaching voices aroused him from his speculation. A mob was coming toward the jail. He heard the outer door, down the corridor leading to the sheriff's office, open and then rushing feet approached his cell. Lordsburg Little appeared, his face drained of its blood, his eyes wild and staring.

"Kid," he cried, "here comes that mob back! I reckon it's you for them, alone. I can't fight a bunch like that and I'm all alone here, now. The undersheriff and Black Pete and his boys have all gone. If I give you a gun could you stand 'em off?"

"I don't want no gun," replied the Kid. "I'll take my chances with them boys, if they are bent on hanging me for Old Jimmy's holdup. Just you let me talk to them, that's all I want."

"I'll do what I can," said Little rushing back to his room.

Soon the corridor filled with human cries and then Cool Herbert appeared and back of him Old Jimmy. A key rattled in the cell door lock and the door was swung open. Lordsburg Little could be seen a little way back in the crowd. "Come on out of there," shouted Cool Herbert. "Old Jimmy's sober, now, and he's told this sheriff what's what. We come along to see that he made it heavy and quick. Get up and come on."

"Wait'll I pin my gat on my hip," smiled the Kid reaching for the belt and gun and buckling these about his middle.

"Goshamighty," exclaimed Lordsburg, " if he didn't have a gun with him all the time." The mob laughed.

"A man oughta be armed in this jail," said the Kid, "for he has to meet up with so many killers in the sheriff's office that he's got to carry his own protection. You men, listen!" he addressed the mob. "A while ago, when the boys come over to this jail to string me up, I was being robbed in the judge's room!"

"What?" cried a voice.

"Just as I said. Black Pete, Nebraska and them other fellows took me out of Lordsburg's office, when we heard you-all roaring outside, and shunted me into the judge's room. There I was knocked to my knees and robbed. Did you-all hear of the murder of Jackson Tilton?"

A BLANK expression flew over the excited countenances of the milling men. "Tell it," some one shouted. The Texas Kid rapidly described the murder. At his conclusion all the faces in the room centered on that of the sheriff.

"What you find, sheriff?" asked Old Jimmy. "At Tilton's ranch?"

"Just as this boy says," answered Lordsburg. "My undersheriff sent a rider to me and I left Gumbo, where I had been looking for a bad greaser, crossed to Tilton's ranch, and found the body sitting before a desk. A knife had been jammed in the old man's side and a bullet hole was through his ear. The coroner rendered a verdict of murder by parties unknown. We buried the old man and then come on here. That's all I've found out, so far."

"You heard about that blotter did you?" asked Old Jimmy.

"I did when I got back to town," answered Little. "And I was told by the undersheriff that this wise kid had read that to the Mexican he caught and that this Mex said the reason he fired at

Tilton was because Tilton had discovered his family's gold and wouldn't cut him in on it. But that's a lie! This Mexican is a piano player in the Paris dance hall. You must remember him, Cool. His name is Marcos Hilario. That tale he told this kid was to throw dust in his eyes. The greaser thought the kid would turn him loose and divide the claim with him."

"But this greaser got away," Cool said.

"I'm tailing him now, with a bunch of salty old hands."

"And I'm betting," laughed the Kid curiously, "that them salty hands brings in a dead man."

Lordsburg's face withered under the glances of the mob.

"Meaning which?" asked Old Jimmy.

"That Lordsburg Little allowed that Mexican to bust out of this jail so he could trail him to that gold mine. Then he'll kill him and locate that gold in his name and split it up with his men; but there's a little laugh on Little, right this minute!" the Kid's voice was lifted in a loud tone of banter and his eyes were alive with a curious fire as he fixed his sight on the giant sheriff's face. Little raised his glance until it met the boy's stare.

"Whatta you trying to insinuate?" he gasped through dried lips.

"I ain't insinuating nothing. I'm telling facts. I lied about losing that blotter and I lied about not having a copy of what was on it. This I had in a chaps' pocket with my cigarette papers. When the undersheriff searched me after I was jugged for trying to rob Old Jimmy, he looked everywhere but among my makings. These were on me when Black Pete, Nebraska and Omaha Mose frisked me in the judge's room. Nebraska clouted me across the head, see?" he laid back his hat and exhibited a blood caked wound in his hair. "Then when I was knocked out they found that note and took it off me. Right this minute Lordsburg's boys is chasing the greaser and I'll bet Black Pete has filed on that claim."

At this information a rush of blood flowed back into Lordsburg's cheeks; his eyes flamed and his throat jerked spasmodically.

"Does you mean that Black Pete got that note?" he asked.

"I sure does," answered the Kid.

"And I means," said Old Jimmy, "and I'm elected chairman of this committee, that if you or ary one of your wolves teches a finger to this kid, any more, that all us boys romps on your brisket. He's to be let alone same as any other man and he's not to be ambushed by Black Pete or you or any of your gang. We don't want no war in this camp, and we aims not to start trouble; but you gotta let this kid alone. Cool Herbert vouches for him and that's all any of us wants to know. If you does carry fight to him then you does it to about four or five hundred other fellas at the same time. Now let's get over to the Land Office and see what's what."

LORDSBURG led the crowd across the square and into the Recorder's Office, and though the hour was early morning that office was open and doing business. A poker game in a far corner was in full swing.

Seven-Minute McGowan was the recorder and he was one government official who always tried to please a mining camp. He had acted in several camps and was universally liked for his obliging ways of conducting his office. He had received his nickname for having broken Poker Folly Davenport, a famous gambler, who ran a faro bank in Santa Fé, in a game of freeze-out, in just seven minutes of play. And he had bet five hundred dollars that he would turn the trick in less than half an hour.

Now Seven-Minute came toward the crowd.

"Gents," he said, "I sure was glad to get out of that chair. I ain't held nothing bigger'n Fours for two hours. What's on your minds?"

"Has there been a claim filed here by Black Pete?" asked Lordsburg Little.

"Uh huh."

"Where is the location?" asked Little.

Seven-Minute turned to a book. Then he said.

"Right Hand Creek at Apache Fork. Starting at a point known at Chimney Rock. What't eating you, Lordsburg? You're down here as one of the locators. You and Nebraska Slim, Omaha Mose, Black Pete and, shucks! they's a flock of names on this thing. Must be something pretty sweet, eh?"

A murmur of anger ran through the crowd.

"Anything crooked?" asked Seven-Minute McGowan. "Does anybody want to file a protest?"

"Nope," said the Kid. "When we gets the name of Jackson Tilton's heirs that will be time enough. I got all the evidence I needs, in case we gets a heir. Otherwise, I reckon—"

"But you gotta pro-tect your own rights, son," said Old Jimmy. "How about you? They stole this paper off of you, didn't they?"

"Say," snapped Lordsburg Little whose face was now wreathed in good humor, "the first fellow who gets a location notice on that land and gets his claim filed in this office gets possession and has about as good a title as the little old U. S. Government knows how to give, ain't that the law, Seven-Minute?"

"Sure is," said Seven-Minute. "I'm the evidence. And this book reads that's what gets the patent from the Land Office. Anything more, boys? If not, I'll go back and lose me some more!"

The Kid winked at Old Jimmy and nudged Cool Herbert. Lordsburg hurried away and the mob followed the Texas Kid into Cool Herbert's Square Deal. After Cool had set 'em up all around and everybody was feeling lovely, as Old Jimmy announced, Cool Herbert made the Kid go to bed.

In a room, which Cool used as his own, located next to the treasure room, the Kid threw himself down on a bed and went almost instantly to sleep. And how he slept. When he awoke the sun was high in the heavens. He had slumbered nearly twelve hours. When he issued into the main room of the Square Deal, Cool Herbert met him.

"You fool you," he smiled, "come on and let's get some bacon and eggs. You've got to satisfy Old Jimmy and a lot of these boys, Kid. They wants to know why you let Lordsburg get away with what you did last night in the Recorder's office."

"Is they et up with a craving to know about that?"

"They sure is, and they're savage, too. I'll bet there is five hundred boys from this town out on Right Hand Creek this minute. That's a new field and a stampede has flown out there which has left this town nearly empty. Black Pete and his boys is holding down that old Spanish mine with scatter guns and the undersheriff is there biggern' a goat a-looking after Lordsburg's interests. One of the deputies says that cave is lousy with gold and when you lights a match in there the rock is all buttered up with specs of yellow as far as you can see. There's a streak runs right through one side of that cave for ten or fifteen feet."

BOTH men laughed as they walked across the street to a restaurant. After their meal was finished and as they were standing in front of the lunch room they saw three men on horses com-

ing into town, and back of these was a pack horse with a limp canvas covered pack roped oddly to an improvised pack saddle.

"What's that on there?" asked Cool.

"Looks to me like a lotta bedding," answered the Kid.

"Bedding? Didja ever see bedding with boots? Look at them feet and legs sticking out from under that canvas. That's a dead man under that tarp, Kid. And his head's hanging down on the other side of that pack horse. Let's cross over and see who it is."

They ran across the street. When the three men rode by the Kid caught sight of the bobbing head of the corpse as it passed. The trio escorting the dead man was composed of deputy sheriffs.

"Who you got?" yelled Cool Herbert.

"We cornered that greaser who broke jail and, say, he fought like a rat. We had to put six forty-fives in him before he quieted down."

Cool Herbert stared at the Kid.

"What'd I tell you?" remarked the Kid. "They got him out o' the way, and now I've got to watch my step. If they figures I'm liable to cause them trouble about that note being stole I can see that I'm in for a right busy time. But what about trying to locate that guy with the big fingers and that blood-colored hand, Cool? I think we oughta get a look at every set of fingers in this camp. Where'll we start? And how'll we go about it? I thought first Black Pete and his crowd had been out to Tilton's place. You remember what I heard Black Pete say as he passed that old Mexican's adobe this side of Lordsburg?"

"You means about him saying he'd like to get a chance at me as well as that old weasel?"

"Yep! That's what I heard him say as he rode along that night. I thought he was speaking of Jackson Tilton. Now it seems I'm all muddled up. I don't believe this sheriff knew anything about it, or he would have had that Spanish mine location the first thing. Then who is it?"

"Keep your shirt on, boy! Somebody will show a hand, after while. Look down that street! Here comes Black Pete and Nebraska now. You walk over to my place and go in there where you been sleeping. You've got to keep shy of these fellas, for we ain't got enough of our men in town, if a fight starts, to protect you, right. Lay low, for a day or two. I'll give you my bed and I'll sleep at the hotel."

The Kid followed Cool Herbert's advice and kept out of sight for the rest of that day. Toward ten o'clock he went to bed. And the last objects which interested him a moment before he blew out his lamp were three knot holes in the thin partition which acted as a wall between his room and that of the storage bins for the gold dust of Cool Herbert's patrons.

He stopped and peered through one of the holes. There he could see the leather pokes and canvas bags which held much of the "tailings" of the miners. One of these knot holes was directly above his bed. Blowing out the lamp he again peeped into the next room where a small lamp sat on a case of wine.

SPECULATING on the wealth which lay so close to him he fell asleep. How long he slept he did not know, but of a sudden he awoke with a sensation as though someone were near him, or that he was being watched. He listened, tried to peer into the darkness about him, and then realized that The Square Deal Saloon was closed. Although it was night not a sound came from the resort. He was on the point of resuming his repose when a swath of light cut across his room. It came out of one of

the knot holes. There was somebody in the treasure room. He'd look! and he did. But all he could see was a man's pants. These were directly before the hole. "Cool Herbert," he thought, and snuggled more deeply into his blankets.

He drowsed; was on the verge of sleep, when a jarring noise in the next room caused him to sit erect in his bed. Then he placed an eye to the hole and there he saw a man shoving a huge sack out of a hole that had been sawed in the far wall.

What a fool he had been! Now the man was about to follow that sack!

He reached for his gun, but recalled that it was on a chair.

Leaping from bed he made a loud racket as he got the gun and then squatted down and glimpsed the interior of the next room through the hole in the partition.

The figure he had seen was now nearly out of the room. Only the head and shoulders appeared and these were rapidly vanishing through the sawed aperture in the wall. Of a sudden a hand reached up, lingered for a fraction of time on the sawed edge of that break in the wall, and there, in the dim light of the small lamp,the Kid beheld the same fingers he had seen on the casings of the French windows at Jackson Tilton's home.

The hand moved, the head and face, which he now saw had been covered with a gunny sack, disappeared, and the fingers were whisked away as if by magic. Only that gaping hole showed. While he had slept, under the impression that Cool Herbert was in the next room, the murderer of Jackson Tilton had stolen the miners' gold and had escaped.

Then a burst of brilliant light flooded him and his position.

And a deep voice boomed beside him.

"Drop that gun, and roll on that bed!" commanded the voice.

The Kid released his weapon which fell to the floor at his feet, then he dropped to the bed. A bull's eye lantern was playing over him from a position near the door which led into the barroom of The Square Deal.

"Come on," a voice whispered back of that lantern.

The door opened and into the room came two masked men. These went to the boy and trussed up his legs and arms, tied him to the bed and, stuffing a face towel into his mouth, tied a cloth tightly about this and then backed through the door, locked it noiselessly and tiptoed away.

From somewhere to the rear of the Square Deal the Kid caught the sounds of a vehicle being driven away.

"Nothing but them fellas not wanting to make any noise kept them from salivating me," he mused. "That's what I gets for sleeping with my gun on a chair. If I had of had that—I'd been a angel by this time, for I sure would of shot one of them grapevine fingers off that bird as he crawfished out of that hole."

HIS thongs hurt him, the gag was a veritable torture and for the rest of the night he agonized in his bed with mental and physical suffering too great, it seemed, to stand. But at last he heard voices in the outer room, one of these he recognized as Cool's, and then a bolt flew back on the other side of the door and Cool Herbert's face appeared. Over it was spreading a sickly look of surprise mixed with fright.

"What come off here?" cried Cool after he had released the Kid.

"Go look in that treasure room," said the boy. "That's the answer. They gutted them bins, Cool. And all the time I was sleeping and listening in here. But I thought it was you. Then a fella what had come into my room when I was asleep, pulled the slide on a bull's

eye and covered me with a gun. His pals hog-tied and gagged me, bolted that door on me, and beat it. They took the gold away in a wagon."

"What time was that?" asked Cool.

"I ain't got the slightest idea."

"Did you see any faces?"

"Nope, for the only face I seen was masked; but I sure seen something else!"

"What, Kid?"

"Them same fingers and that same hand I seen on the casing at Jackson Tilton's house. Dern me, if things ain't running in circles. Now what we gonna do? Ain't you gonna track that gold?"

"That wagon oughtn't be hard to track!" smiled Cool.

"That's so, let's get going."

"Kid, I'll go bunch up some boys. You go wrangle you some hen fruit and swine breast. Eat plenty—the road may be long. But don't meander, much. If you do you may get leaky. Black Pete, or some of his gang is what I'm alluding to by way of a reference. You eat and loaf until I comes back with the boys. Do you think your jaws can chomp four bits worth as they is?"

"I can take a banquet all apart, in just a even ten minutes. And I'll do it with me a-looking out the window. Don't you worry about Black Pete. As soon's I gets one look at him I begins to spray his carcass with lead. I'm done being gentle with that crowd and I'm on the prod as soon as I am fed."

"I'll be back."

"I heard you, and I believes you, too."

Cool, with the men who had entered The Square Deal with him, walked away. The Kid crossed the street to the restaurant.

Surely, it seemed to him, that the consumptive was indeed cool and unconcerned about the tremendous loss he and the camp had sustained. Then he recalled the deadly look in Cool's eyes, and somehow he felt that that day would mark a tragic drama to Paradise.

Men like Cool Herbert spoke but little. But when they were roused? The boy walked on with a beating tumult flooding his mind.

CHAPTER VII

PEDRO'S WARNING

IN THE restaurant the Texas Kid caught sight of Old Jimmy.

"How," said the old prospector smilingly inviting the Kid to a seat beside him with a glance. The Kid sat down, facing the door, with the only window to the room in full view. He felt utterly safe.

"I ain't aiming to do much drinking for a few days," remarked Old Jimmy by way of an opening.

"How come the resolution? Old R. E. Morse sit up with you last night?"

"Somewhat Kid! But Cool Herbert curled my hair with a line of language I ain't took from no man since Curly Bill. Bill made me roll a peanut, one time. Lord, but Cool was mad. And I was a fool. We might 'a' hung you, boy. And if we had we'd sure been a set of fools and I would of had to get drunk and stay drunk a long time to forget about that. But I found out who and what you was, in time. If I was sure that it was Nebraska who hit me that wallop—"

"I sure thought it was him. But of course that street's a little dark in spots," said the Kid.

"We'll find out. All us boys is working thataway, and when we're sure there'll be a hanging and I fancies it'll come off wholesale. Too bad this town ain't got a Pathfinder to Heaven. I feel it in my bones that we're gonna have burials galore; and at weddings and burials a Skypilot shines out."

"Tell me," asked the Kid, "who was with you in The Long Island?"

"Everybody that was thirsty, I reckon. When I passed out, and my memory began to look like the gray dawn of a duck hunt, just as the ducks come in, I seen everybody I knowed. When I come to alongside of you derned if you wasn't the only fellow I could see. But when Cool told me what you done and how you done it, that was after we had flocked to jail to hang you, why I felt as silly as if I had been catched coming out of a melon patch. Willya forgive a old fool, son?"

"The Square Deal was robbed last night, Jimmy. All the gold was toted out through a sawed hole in a wall; and I was sleeping in the next room."

"*All* the gold, son?" the old man's face was like that of a mask. But the emphasis on that word "all" was profound.

"Yep, all of it. Leastways I don't reckon them fellows would leave none of it when they had a wagon to pack it off in. And I was disturbing 'em none. I thought I seen Cool Herbert's pants. I woke up, peeked through a knot hole, seen them pants and went back to my pillow. Directly, I heard a loud noise, jumped up, and Lord, I seen that hole, and what was more, a masked face and a hand with fingers. Unforgettable fingers! Uh! Bloody red and purple."

"Huh? A hand with fingers? What kind o' fingers?"

"Them fingers I seen on that hand out to Jackson Tilton's. Remember I told all you boys about that over in the jail?"

"Hand with fingers!" repeated Old Jimmy. "Blood red fingers!"

"Same hand, every which way you look at it. Then a light was flashed on me. A fellow had come into my room and was watching me pound my pillow ear. Why he didn't salivate me when I jumped for my smoke pole, I don't know! But he cooled me down when he flashed that bull's eye and spoke to me right earnest. I dropped my gun and was gentled, right now."

"Hand with fingers! And all the gold is gone!" Jimmy's voice was without expression, and his face was but a blank.

A waitress came to the table.

"How you want them eggs, Tex?" she asked with a smile.

"A-bundantly," laughed the Kid. "Which means plenty in any man's talk. How you know my name's Tex?"

"I was invited to the hanging, last night, by a runt cowboy turned high-heeled miner; but you spoiled the show. How does it feel to have your bacon-and egg-chute give back to you that-away?"

"You might slide in a plate of prunes. When you been as near to what I was gazing at there's a lot o' sweat and sweetness what is burned outa you. But, say, maybe you ain't no prune-shooter. How about it?"

"Nope, I sure ain't. No prunes, that I knows of, closer'n Deming on the east, or St. Johns to the north. Wouldn't some dried apples, what's been boiling a while, do? If I give you the brown sugar bowl?" She made eyes at him.

SHE was obviously, at this instant, trying to make the Kid understand that she wanted him to leave the table. He sensed this, anyhow, for he felt that she had something to say that she did not wish Old Jimmy to hear.

"Lemme look at them dried apples," he said. "Can I?"

"Come on."

"But won't that cook get to snorting if a guest comes in his workshop?"

"Boy, that cook is Mister All-Bones-And-No-Flesh; and he's just out of chin, which same is a sign that you could take a corn cob pipe and a lightning bug and run him into a bear trap. You've got a reputation, today, and it's

worked its way right into our kitchen. Come on and see our fruit."

"This is one sure thirteen-fifty country where they calls dried apples fruit; but I got to eat something sweet to put bone in my backbone."

"If what they tells me you showed the posse, last night, is what you pack all the time, the sand in your craw is as hard to get rid of as a strawberry birthmark. I'll let him come back, Jimmy," said the girl. When the Kid was a few feet from the table she whispered, "Old Jimmy is all right, I reckon, but the chef told me to get you out here, secret. Go on in that door."

The Texas Kid entered the kitchen and there he saw Pedro Sanchez whose face was wreathed in delighted smiles. He came to Tex immediately.

"You must be very careful, today," he said. "Black Pete and his crowd is dead drunk and he says he'll kill you on sight."

"Where is he?"

"At The Long Island."

"Who's with him?"

"Nebraska and many bad hombres of these town. Most hees men is out in hills at fine claim he locate. To celebrate, Black Pete is come back and then go dronk, big ways, plenty, fast! You watch out, mebbe so. I keep eye on street from dese kitchen. If I see some-t'ing I stick my head in door and yell, 'On de table!' den dese old man Jimmy he not find out wan t'ing, mebbe."

"I sure does thank you, Pedro; but Old Jimmy is all right. Did you hear about The Square Deal being robbed last night?"

The girl flopped into a kitchen chair. Then she laughed.

"Did they get the gold that was stored there?"

"I reckon so. And all of it, too!"

"There's another marriage spoilt," she gurgled. "That runt cowboy Alabam told me he had enough gold stored with Cool Herbert so's him and me could settle down and live docile for ten years, without me ever getting my hands in suds. Now that's all gone. Without that gold he ain't got nothing left. Why, Tex, he tried to hold me in his lap and I fell through it. He's that bowlegged."

"Hi, Ague!" The girl leaped for the door.

"That's him now," she said. Then through the door she shouted, "How many times have I preached to you that my name's Aggie, and not Ague! Come on back here, and I'm sure a-going to give you some news."

Alabam came on the hurry. Aggie introduced him to the Kid. "Now what's the news?" The Square Deal storeroom was robbed of all them sausages you gold panning boys had strung up in there. That's news, ain't it? Now look where our marriage has went!"

Alabam's face was went pasty white, a silly grin flicked his lips. "Bad luck ain't no news," he murmured. "Anyhow, I don't see how that stops our getting hitched, double!"

"You don't, eh! Well, Alabam, taking a wife is quite a item. And taking one after making rainbow promises like you did, and then showing her nothing but the place where the sun went down —say, you saddle-warped shrimp, I stays right where-at I am. This way I knows I'm never far from my pancakes as long as I'm wearing a track between a dining room and a cook stove. Boy, don't look so much like a last Fourth of July pinwheel. You're caved in like a mud house."

THEN Alabam grinned. His blanched face became a flushing crimson. "Fooled you that time," he said. "I sure fooled you that time. Ague—"

"Don't call me Ague—it reminds me of home. What you grinning about?"

"That wedding never was intended to

be called off. It moves on and up and up and up, with me prancing beside it and you. Drap all this messy work and go get yourself a lace curtain train and begin to whittle your voice so's you can say, 'I will' and 'I do.' Last night I took all my gold out o' Cool's place and looped it around my hips. I feels like as if—"

"You hound dog, Alabam. Ain't he a wolf at making a woman love him? Look at him, Kid! Now he ain't so bad looking, is he? And when I plugs up them holes in his front teeth with some of his gold, and pads out the hollows in his legs, I reckon I can eat my breakfast with him kind o' like he was a Home Sweet Home motto staring at me from the wall. Alabam, you was saying you feels like—what?"

"Like a fellow what had just stepped off a railroad track to let a fast mail go by. I can feel the whizz of that loss now; but something told me to take out that gold, just like something told me to come on down to this end of town. I feels blood in the air. Blood and love! That's the way I feels. Has anybody been tantalizing you?"

"Not me, but Black Pete is making his brags that he aims, right immediate, to make a sieve outa the Texas Kid. Maybe that was what brought you, thisaway! If Pete's coming this way, why—!"

"If that Black Pete comes in here," said Alabam, "I'll fix him so that when he goes home his own dogs will bark at him. Kid," he turned to the Kid, "let's I and you go on into the dining room. Then you tell me about the robbery." Alabam and the Kid went back to the table and sat beside Old Jimmy. Here the Kid detailed the robbery to Alabam. Clearly Jimmy's appetite had fled. His plate had not been touched since the Kid had left the table. His eyes roved, he gulped continuously and his hands twitched.

"Lord," he said, "and at my age, too! Maybe I can, and maybe I can't. Fingers! Hand! All that yellow, yellow, coarse gold. Why, it was in flakes, like oatmeal; in grains, like wheat; in nuggets like the kernels of a walnut. All gone."

"Did you have gold there, Jimmy?" asked Alabam.

"I had so much gold in Cool's cribs that it made my old burro Abraham swaybacked packing it in from the desert. I'll salivate, I'll crucify, I'll whipsaw them fellas what stole that!"

He became incoherent. The Kid and Alabam pitied him and stared at him as he raved; as he spoke of the wasted years, of the hardship and torture that had been his to win that gold which he had panned, in a dry placer, and brought to town.

Aggie came and laid the Kid's breakfast before him.

"Tex," she said placing the coffee beside his plate, "you stick with Alabam. I've seen a lot o' gin men and gunmen in my biscuit shooting days up and down this border, but I wants to tell you that this period point I'm going to wedlock myself to is about as fast, fond and frequent with a six-gun as any man I ever clamped two eyes on. And if I marries him I sure hocks his gun the first thing. You stick with him, today, and you tag along with Tex, Alabam."

"You don't have to go to rawhiding me yet—the wedding ain't started! But don't you worry, Ague!" chirped Alabam.

"Aggie! daggone you, Aggie!—I done told you!" shrieked Aggie.

"All right, Ague, I'm just saying that this old gun of mine makes so much smoke, when she speaks, that I have to run around it to take a second shot; but if I hits anything with what it spits out it sure makes any such of a thing sit down, and stay, just thataway. Yon-

der comes Cool and some of the boys! Cool's mad, too! Look at his eyes! They're worse'n a tantalized skunk's with the hydrophobia or the orbs of a she-bear what a fellow has turned wild by packing off her cubs."

OLD JIMMY came out of his abstraction. Cool, with some five or six of his men entered the lunchroom. He came to the Kid's table and stared into his eyes.

"We found the wagon," he said. "It had never left town. All that gold dust is right here in Paradise or else it went out in saddle bags or on pack horses. Boy, we ain't got a trace of it."

The kitchen door opened with a crash. Pedro Sanchez' voice sounded shrilly in the room.

"On de table! On de table!"

They all looked through the window. Black Pete, Lordsburg Little, Nebraska and thirteen other men were hurrying down the opposite side, making for the Square Deal. Obviously every man in that fast walking group was under the savage influence of whiskey. They entered Cool Herbert's place. Then Cool spoke.

"I'll go across," he said, "and entertain them birds while you make yourself scarce, Tex. I've got six good boys with me, and I reckon I can talk to them fellers, over there, in a language they'll understand. You, Alabam, go and get as many of the square shooters as you can find and hustle them down to my place. The Square Deal is right soon to be so full of smoke that it'll take a man with a deep sea diver's suit on to walk through it, if he wants to get his breath. You hide, Texas! Fade, for a while."

"Cool Herbert, I've quit hiding. If you crosses that street I'm pegging along at your heels. I'm through running, now; and from this on I've got my neck bowed and my war paint on," said the Kid.

Cool evidently saw the decision in the Kid's eyes. For a second he stared at the boy, then he said, "All right, Pedro, you wrangle up some of the boys. Tell 'em to come on the tear!"

Pedro ran to the street without removing his apron. Cool's voice droned on in a sort of an undertone.

"This camp is almost vacant of men, Tex. They've all gone out to the new strike at Right Hand Creek. But sooner or later Lordsburg and Black Pete have to collect what was coming to 'em and this morning is as good a time as any. You and Alabam circle, and come into my place through the rear. I'll have the door open."

"I'll crucify 'em! I sure will!" yelled Old Jimmy jumping from his chair and darting out toward the kitchen. Then he stopped. "Wait till you sees what I brings back with me," he cried. "Just you-all wait! Gone! All that yellow, butter-gold, gone! Wait, boys! I'm sure a-coming back! I'll show that Square Deal say-loon what a square-deal looks like."

He vanished through the kitchen and as Cool Herbert walked across to his resort Old Jimmy's running footsteps could be heard clipping along the gravel back to the restaurant.

"Give Cool about five minutes to get that back door open," said Alabam.

"I ain't stepping on my toes to get into that place," replied the Kid, " 'cause I knows something is sure a-going to drop. And it may be me."

"Honey," said Aggie to Alabam. "I was only joshing you about not a-wanting to marry you when you was broke. Why, wild broncs couldn't keep me out o' your arms."

"Fly back in that kitchen," commanded Alabam. "I want to pull off my pants."

"Have you gone loco?" asked Aggie.

"I ain't et no weed for so long," smiled Alabam, "but I'm just a-wanting

to show you what kind o' lover-man you done said that long drawn 'yes' to. I'm a-craving to pull down my pantaloons so's I can unhook all my gold and leave it for you. If I comes out of The Square Deal, in any kind of marrying shape, I'll ask you for them pokes I'm packing on my hips now. If all you sees of me is the soles of my feet, sticking toward Cool's front door, and I'm all horizontal and sure enough still then you keeps that dust and go buy yourself a soft-spoken, doe-eyed, guitar playing husband and name the first-born Alabam. Now get out o' here!" Aggie ran for the kitchen.

CHAPTER VIII

Pete Draws the Joker

COWBOYS have always been quick lovers and fast haters.

What they liked was bred in their bones and to get it out didn't take more than a look in an eye, a friendly nod; and they banked, fought, loaned their money, and would risk their lives on that idea, hunch, emotion or habit. What they disliked was the other way around; but it followed the same sudden and brief urge of the brain and the senses.

Thus when Alabam and the Texas Kid walked out of the restaurant beside the rear door of which they left Aggie holding Alabam's poke in one hand and wiping a wet eye with the edge of her apron with the fingers of the other, these two cowboys were as much friends as they would have been after a ten-year constant association.

"Now, listen, Kid," said Alabam. "I can see by your eye that you're working inside; but don't you let that hate get you bogged down. What you gotta be is sure enough human. One slip here and maybe we won't get a chance to feed that hate. Just one little bobble, and them hounds will get the jump on us and then'll come our finish, quick. What you aiming to do, first?"

"I intends to walk into that barroom and make Black Pete and that whole gang eat crow! If one of 'em reaches for his smoke pole I aims, right then, to beat him to it. Otherwise my gun stays bedded down in its leather and my eyes keeps on being just as busy as my mouth. You don't know what I've took off Black Pete, Rowdy Evans, Nebraska and them fellas; and you don't know what I intends to show you after a little while."

"Why don't you do it now? They may not be no after awhile for me. I don't aim to squat down like a house cat when I feels Cool Herbert's floor under my feet. Aggie didn't lie to you Tex when she said I could slip and sling a fast gun. My legs may be bowed, but the Lord was sure good to me when it come to hands and fingers. What was it you intends to show me?"

"A paper I took out of Jackson Tilton's dead fingers! But Cool Herbert's got that and until this jamboree is over I can't show it to you. Now, when the fight begins you leave Black Pete, Rowdy Evans, Nebraska and Lordsburg Little to me. Pick anybody else as a target, but don't let's double up the spots where we buries our dead. I'll take care of them fellows first, and after that it'll be hit a head whereever you can see one. Is here where we hurries to The Square Deal's rear door?"

"Yep. Now up on your toes and let's jump this next fifty feet, fast."

They ran across an open area and dropped to a walk when a side wall afforded them a shelter. Along and around this they hurried and down an alley to The Square Deal. As they approached a door a bolt was heard to slip behind it.

"Now," murmured Alabam, "she's

already. Cool has slid that bolt and the way's clear. You're part human, kid, and the rest is cowboy. Take your time; get riled, but don't get careless, and remember that what we're on is like a game of fourhanded euchre. You've got a podner and you've got to lean on him to play some of the cards. Here's my paw, shake!"

Their hands met, they looked into each other's eyes. Then the Texas Kid flung open the door and sprang suddenly inside the room. The backs of Black Pete's gang were turned toward him. None of them had noticed his entrance. With a few steps he stood almost at the end of the bar and in a position so that he could watch Black Pete, Little, Rowdy Evans and Nebraska. Alabam was immediately at the Kid's left side. Then Tex spoke and his voice chilled and stilled the room.

"Pete, was you boys craving to get a sight of me?" he asked.

THERE were exactly sixteen men at that bar. And like a movement of infantry sixteen forms swung in unison and sixteen pairs of eyes fixed themselves upon the persons of Alabam and the Kid. Drink inflamed brains cleared in that first look.

Cool Herbert stepped to the top of a high box back of the bar. In either hand he held a large navy Colt. The men who had come with him into the saloon were distributed about The Square Deal in various strategic positions. One was back of the stove, another in a lookout's chair, another at the front end of the bar where he could sweep the entire room with his eyes and the others were ranged along a wall to the side of Black Pete's pals.

"They said they was," sneered Cool Herbert. "Said they was down here to see that Pete and you finished this grudge that you've got. Lordsburg claimed he and the other boys was only along to see fair play. That's what they was telling me when you come in the door."

"What you gotta say, Pete?" asked the Kid.

Black Pete's manner changed. A smile—a nasty, twisted, effigy of forced mirth—wrinkled his face. His lips drew in, his eyes rolled in their sockets, his nostrils expanded and his throat pulsed visibly. Yet he made no sound. He couldn't; his throat had gone suddenly dry, and his tongue was sanded to the roof of his mouth.

"Stand out from them other boys," snapped the Kid. "Stand out, I say, and do your talking like a man. I don't want to kill four or five of you fellows!"

Pete stepped away from his companions. Then came his voice. It sounded like the hiss a weasel emits when cornered.

"Have you gone crazy, kid?" he asked.

"What I oughta do," answered the Texas Kid, his eyes flashing an angry fire directly and constantly into those of Pete, "is to braid my gun around your brow and work you over like I would a wife-beating Mexican. Have I gone crazy? Haven't I had enough to turn me skunk-wild and bushwhack every one of you? Why don't you make a play with that good hand of yours?"

"You crippled my gun hand, and I don't know how to use the other one good, yet!" The man's very voice showing a dastardly cunning that was racing through his mind. The impression filled the room that he was playing for time, looking for an opening that would give him the advantage. But the Texas Kid's eyes would not leave his face for a second. And this cowed Pete's friends.

"What did you come down here for then?" asked the Kid. "Was you fig-

uring on shooting me in the back?"

"Wait a minute, young fella!" interrupted Lordsburg Little. "I'm sheriff here, and right now I arrests you for threatening a man's life. Gimme them guns!"

"Close that front door!" cried Cool Herbert to a man standing near it. The door was locked. "Hand the key to me," commanded Cool. All eyes focused on the man who stepped around Black Pete and the Kid and laid the key on the top of Cool's chair.

"Now," said Cool, "proceed! But remember this, if you, Lordsburg, teches that boy, or lays a finger on your gun, I'm going to cut you off at the hips with one of these old navy slugs. Proceed with your law and order. I'm keeping the peace in my own saloon."

Now it was Lordsburg's time to think fast and he certainly changed his tone.

"Cool, I've known you a long time," he began.

"You bet, Lordsburg," broke in Cool, "and you've never seen me back down with such hardware as this in my hands, have you?"

"Don't you know you're committing a crime by obstructing justice? Don't you know you're preventing a officer of the law from performing his sworn duty? Don't you know that?" said Lordsburg in a mild tone of persuasion. "I only wants to get this boy in jail so's to save a lot o' trouble. Why, Cool, if a gun was to crack in here, don't you know—?"

"YOU bet I knows. If a gun barks in this room, or if indications is such as I thinks one of your boys has got the fever to try to make a gun crack, why, just the moment I gets such a fool notion I removes a sheriff from office and gives St. Peter another angel. I works first on you, Lordsburg, and keeps on pecking at you. The way to keep the peace in this place is to prevent your shooting irons from moving about. One gun out and there'll be a mess."

"It would be a mess, if a fight was to start now," said Black Pete, "yes, sir, a sure enough mess, in this room. And for what?"

"You oughta thought that out before you got so high on them brags you made about getting my hide," sneered the Kid. Then he lashed Pete with a torrent of abuse. And as he talked his mind raced with a sudden urge. And the more his brain reeled with its uncanny suggestion, the more he thrilled at the plausibility of the prompt.

"Your gun hand ain't right certain, always, is it, Pete?" he mocked. "You ain't had too much practice, eh?"

"I don't get the hang of a gun in it, well enough," grinned Black Pete. "If I was, like I was, I'd walk into the street with you and have this thing over, right now."

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do," said the Kid. "I'll take hold of one end of a neckerchief and you the other. Cool Herbert will say, are you ready, boys?' and each of us will answer 'yes,' and then Cool will count, *one, two, three, four, five!* When he starts with that we begins to open fire and we gotta quit when he says five. How's that?"

"Why that's nothing but murder, first class murder. Neither one of us would come out of a fight like that," said Pete, the blood leaving his blanched face at the very thonght.

"You could take the neckerchief in the fingers of your stiff hand and your other hand would hold your gun. You'd have a fifty-fifty chance with me and both of us would be done for when the smoke lifted," explained the Kid.

"That ain't no way to fight!" said Pete in a rattle of a voice.

"I knows it ain't, and I also knows that if I stays around in this town you'll kill me. Being's as how this is my idea

I just figured that both of us hate the other enough to want to get him. With you gone and me gone Paradise might turn peaceful."

"I won't do it!" snapped Pete.

A body lurched against the front door. Old Jimmy's face appeared over a strip of painted glass.

"Lemme in, Cool!" he shrieked. "Lemme in this door!"

Cool shook his head and Jimmy vanished.

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do," said the Kid as though the intrusion of Old Jimmy had not interrupted his talk with Black Pete. "I'll highcard you for the right to use a gun."

"What?"

"I'll highcard you for the first shot. I and you will stand beside that stud table. On it will be one gun. You and me is without weapons. Alabam, here, takes a new deck, removes it from its packing and lays it between us. I cut and you cut, and the fellow what gets the highest card picks up the gun and salivates the other man. If that's all square, and if that's agreeable to Lordsburg, and you, let's go, now!"

AGAIN Black Pete's racing mind filled with cunning. This meant delay. This meant that time would hold back the hate he saw burning in the Kid's eyes, the hate that he feared would burst into a flame which would ignite the Kid's passion and start him shooting. Maybe in the movement to the table he would get a chance to pull his gun; or Lordsburg, or one of the boys would get a chance to shoot. He'd agree to it.

"Suits me," he said, providing Lordsburg agrees to no blame on the part of the law after it's done." He flashed a significant look at the sheriff.

"Duels," said Lordsburg, "when they's fair and square is never murder, out in the country, and the law don't take no nevermind of 'em a-tall. If you fellows want to act thatway, why, go ahead."

"Stay where you are, men!" snapped Cool Herbert. "Let Tex and Pete and Alabam move out to that table, alone."

This wasn't what Black Pete wanted at all. His face evinced this decision in an added sweep of ashen hue. Yet he made no sound.

"Before the winner picks up his gun," said Cool, "he has got to give the other fellow a chance to saw anything, or write a letter to his folks. Is this agreeable?"

Here was Pete's chance.

"That's it," he said. "If the man who loses wants to gig back and take water, or write a letter, or say something to somebody, he'll have that chance. Maybe the Kid would beg my pardon, if he lost. If he did I'd sure let him leave camp, and I wouldn't shoot him. Why—"

But the Kid moved toward the table.

"Come over here, Pete," he said. "Alabam you get a deck."

Pete moved to the table as Alabam took a new deck from a poker table drawer. He broke the seal, removed the pack entire and laid it between Pete and the Kid. "Guns, gents," he said, "I'll take 'em from you both." Two guns were removed and placed on a chair.

Then Alabam picked up the deck.

"Shall I riffle 'em?" he asked. Pete and the Kid nodded.

Alabam shuffled the cards with a dexterous movement of both thumbs alongside two corners.

"Cut," he said, offering the pack to Pete.

"I'll shuffle, too," said Pete.

"And me, after you," answered the Kid.

For many seconds the snapping of the cards sounded in that room. Then Pete extended the pack to the Kid. Tex snapped the deck in a quick flip and

handed it to Alabam who placed the pasteboards between the two men.

"Cut," he said, "who's first?"

"Pete can have it," said the Kid.

"I'll go last," said Pete.

"All right," said the Kid, "here goes!"

He cut a shallow cut and laid the cards on the table without exposing one.

"Watcha got?" asked Pete.

"Cut," answered the Kid, "then I'll show you."

Pete's fingers trembled as they slid down deeply on the deck. Then he whisked off a portion of the pack.

The Kid exposed his bottom card. It was the King of Hearts.

"Boys, yelled Pete, "are you a-going to stand for this?"

He faced the crowd of his friends. A craven look filled his face.

"I gets you first, Lordsburg," sounded Cool Herbert's voice. "Turn over them cards, Pete!"

Slowly the bottom of Pete's cut appeared. A cry of joy escaped from his lips. He had exposed the joker which Alabam had not removed from the pack. "No cut," yelled Pete. "I got the joker!"

"Cut again," commanded Cool Herbert. "Both of you cut!"

Again the cards were riffled and shuffled by Alabam, Pete and the Kid. The Kid drew a Knave of Clubs. Then—

Just as Pete screamed, "I won't draw! I'm through!" the rear door burst open with a loud bang and Old Jimmy rushed into the room. High over his head, held in both of his old hands, while below his blazing eyes told of a maniacal fury which was obsessing his brain, the old man held a long piece of lead pipe. From a dozen places on its sides could be seen large number-two detonating caps. Clearly Old Jimmy was about to throw a bomb to the floor of that saloon. Then he cried.

"Hands up, all of you gazabos! Hands up and the fear of the Lord in your hearts. Steal my dust will ya! Steal *my* dust, after I've lived like a pack rat for forty years! Steal it will ya? Now listen to me!"

EVERY hand in that room lifted high above its owner's head. Every hand except those of Cool Herbert.

"Jimmy," he said, "this ain't no way to carry on! What's eating you? I don't like to bore that old hide of yours, but if you don't get out of here I sure will."

"Bore, will ya? Go ahead! And when I drops dead this pipe will go off and The Square Deal will be kindling wood. I got eighteen number twos pinned to this pipe and ten sticks of giant inside it. You took care of my dust, Cool Herbert, and you let these wolves steal it. Where is that dust? Tell it, right now! Or by the Etarnal I'll let her drap!"

Black Pete made a dive for the front door, but crashed against it and broke its glass when his fingers could not open it. Other men piled back of him, Lordsburg brought up the rear.

"Don't throw that thing," yelled Cool. "Don't throw it, Jimmy. I'll weigh you out, ounce for ounce, all the gold you had stored with me. Get out, Pete, and all you boys! If Jimmy lets loose that powder I ain't got any more business than a prairie dog. Here's the key!"

Through the air shot the front door key.

In a fraction of time Lordsburg, Pete and all their men were crowding out of the door, and as they jammed and pushed their way into the street a hand suddenly reached up and grasped the side of the door. An instant only did it hang there, then it was gone. But in that instant the Kid had seen it. He gasped, picked up his gun and was rush-

ing to the exit when Cool stopped him.

"Get back there, Texas," he cried, "don't you feed yourself to that mob. What's come over you, anyhow?"

"I seen the same hand I saw out at Jackson Tilton's. I seen it laid against that door, right now. Are you going to let that fellow get away, like that?"

"Where's my gold?" shrilled Old Jimmy. "Where is it, I asks you for the last time?"

Cool came down from his box and approached the old prospector.

"Jimmy," he said, "you ain't lost no gold. For the last three nights I been skeered something would happen to that dust, so yesterday I filled up a lot of sacks and empty pokes with gravel and sand and stuck these in them cribs back yonder. The gold I got a-laying under the floor boards of that daggoned treasure room of mine."

Old Jimmy began to laugh. And as he roared the engine of explosion above his head was in danger of being dropped. The Kid took it out of the old man's hands.

"You fooled 'em, didja, Cool!" cried Jimmy. "So did I! Them's old caps, and this pipe is full of nothing but rags!"

CHAPTER IX

The Coils Tighten

INVOLUNTARILY a roar of laughter filled The Square Deal.

And in the revelation of what Old Jimmy's bomb had been the Kid forgot, for the instance, of the finger and the hand he had seen. Then Cool Herbert started for the door. "Get behind that bar," he said. "I think they're coming. That last laugh of ours must of boiled 'em high and spilled 'em over."

Alabam, Jimmy and the Kid with the six men who had accompanied Cool, darted behind the heavy mahogany bar. Cool stood, straddle legged, just inside the door. But no one entered. Then he stared across the street at the restaurant. Aggie's agonized face peering from a window fixed his attention. It was like looking into a mirror, to study the countenance of the waitress. Fear, suspense, surge of joy and lurch of misery, were as truly pictured there as though Aggie's voice were announcing the sensation of each emotion. Now her eyes flew up the street, then down. Her mouth gaped, this second, and her thin lips clamped down the next.

Soon Pedro appeared leading at least thirty heavily armed men. "This, then," mused Cool, "was what she was a-seeing! She was expecting somebody to get hostile, in front of her. Oh, oh, Alabam! Come here and wave a hand at your trailing arbutus!"

"At my what?" questioned Alabam racing toward the door. Then he saw Aggie's eyes upon him! And how she joyed at the sight of him! And how she hoisted the poke he had given her as she laughed!

"Wait till I tells you what Cool Herbert just called you," he yelled out of the door. "It's worse'n Ague. I can't pronounce it!"

"I don't care what he called me, and I don't care what you calls me so long as that runt carcass of yours ain't all full of holes. What'd you do to Pete?" she asked so loudly that Black Pete stood still in the street to hear Alabam's answer.

"We let him draw the Joker!" cried Alabam. "You should of seen him!"

Evidently this nettled Black Pete and his crowd, for Cool saw the men with Pedro spring apart and make a flash of their weapons and then he heard one of them sing out, "Pass along, you hombres, or this fight takes place in the street."

"Look!" yelled Aggie. "Yonder

comes the locusts, the seven-year locusts, it looks like. I never seen so much dust since I quit waiting table."

"What it 'tis, Ague?" yelled Alabam.

"Daggone your worthless old bow-legged hide! Didn't I tell you not to call me that? I can't see for sure, but it looks like them stampeders who flew out to Right Hand Creek and Apache Fork. But, boy, they're sure a-coming home."

Black Pete and Lordsburg with their men turned and stared in the direction indicated by Aggie; then they walked hurriedly away. Pedro crossed the street with the men he had gathered and there the tale was told of how the Kid had bluffed Pete, and of how Old Jimmy had frightened Lordsburg and his men into a panic with a piece of old lead pipe and a few water soaked caps.

"I reckon," said the leader of the men Pedro had brought, "that we knows who did that stealing, now."

"They ain't been nothing stole," said Jimmy. "Cool had changed sacks and swapped sand for gold dust. All the gold of us boys is safe right this minute. But what did you find?"

"I was coming to that," said the leader. "I and two other fellows located most of them sacks and a lot of white sand in a big box back of The Long Island, and as we knows that Cool is the only man in town what has white sand in his joint we'd come to the conclusion that he had outsmarted these thieves."

"That tells me something," said the Kid. "Them fellas thought I had switched that gold, or else they thought I had the dust in my room. And when they found they had packed off a lot of sand they got to leaning ag'in the booze and heating up their bile till it seemed the Texas Kid was all that they could feed on. Cool Herbert?"

"Huh?" asked Cool a twinkle in his eye.

"You knew dern well that I would worry about that gold being lost! Why did you let me go to breakfast without telling me the truth? asked the Kid.

"THEM fellas what was standing outside of your door when you told me what had come off was a-waiting for me to open up the joint when I come to work. And I didn't want 'em to know too much until I was sure of them. Anyhow, I wanted the camp to get riled up a bit. Now suppose I had of told you, and suppose Old Jimmy hadn't gone hogwild and snake smart, maybe, I ain't a-saying for sure, but maybe, you would still be drawing cards with Pete, or—"

"Suppose I had of drawn low card, Cool?" asked the Kid.

"I would have made Pete look like a sieve," said Alabam. "And don't think I wouldn't. I seen what was going on back of his eyes, all the time he was getting ready to draw. He wouldn't have let you bust a cap! He would have craw-fished! So I made up my mind that I would hoist your gun to you, after I had made Pete a deceased subject for the coroner, and then we'd of filled Cool's place with smoke."

"And me," said Cool, "I would have told Lordsburg that he would have got his'n the minute Pete's hand touched that gun on the table. But I knew Pete was yellow and wouldn't go through with it. That's why I let it go on. I knew he'd quit under the strain."

"So did I," said the Kid. "Didja think I was a fool?"

"But him a-drawing that joker!" laughed Alabam.

"Alabam? Oh, Alabam! Here they come! And there's blood on the moon. Look down the street!" Aggie's voice screeched into the air. Alabam ran to the door, took a long look, and darted back to Cool Herbert, his face registering fear.

"It's all them stampeders," he said in a low startled tone. "And it looks like they're coming direct for this joint. What's come over them fellas, I wonder. They're plumb savage."

The Kid looked at Cool and both men smiled into each other's eyes. "I reckon," said Cool, casually, "that the gold up there has done petered out."

A rumble and a roar came from the street, then the sound of rushing feet as many men sprang upon the boardwalk and crowded into The Square Deal. One of them, clearly the captain of the returning miners, acted as spokesman. He talked directly to Cool Herbert.

"What we found out there in them hills," he began, "leads us to reckon that you and that sliver-built Texas Kid put up a job on this camp. You brung a lowdown, worthless, poor, little greaser to the jail, and had the undersheriff lock him up. Then that Texas Kid charges that Mex with shooting off the ear of Jackson Tilton. He reads a blotter to the Mex and tells him of a gold mine. Then you gets that greaser out of jail and he leads Black Pete's men to a place where he was a-heading, and after he got there he had to be killed. Why was it you did that thing?"

"Wait a minute!" cried Cool Herbert. "Ain't you pot hounds got no sense, a-tall? Choose a couple o' men that you can trust, but don't let one be that undersheriff I sees out on that sidewalk, and then follow me." The captain motioned to two of the mob. The three followed Cool into the room the Kid had occupied the night before. Five, ten, fifteen minutes went by. Laughter was coming from the room in great bursts as the undersheriff, seemingly on tenterhooks of an unbearable suspense, edged his way through the crowd and made a leap for the street.

"Get that man!" yelled the Kid just as the door opened and Cool and his companions appeared.

"Let him go," said Cool. "He'll carry just the sort o' news we want to get back to his gang. Boys, I've proved to your committee all about this affair and later I'll show you what I showed them fellas, just now."

"Is that all right?" someone asked.

"Sure is," replied the captain of the mob, "and I'm ding danged bumfuddled if it ain't a scream. But, boys, you-all gotta wait! There's a murder to be cleared up and Cool thinks he and this Texas Kid is getting powerful warm and close on the tracks of the man what drove that knife hilt-deep into Jackson Tilton's ribs. Cool wants you-all to quiet down, sprinkle around town, casual-like, to put the fear of the Lord in Black Pete, and all other bad hombres, and wait until he is ready to lay the proof open for you to see and to read. Trust us, boys, it's funny and it's a finish. As soon as a fella with the right kind of fingers is found, that's the time you-all hears a tale and starts out on another stampede. This time it's a sure go! Will you-all ca'm down, keep your mouths shet and go along easy?"

A HOWL of assent indicated the mind of the mob.

"Come on, you throat-dry mica-hunting, fool's-gold prospectors," sang out Cool, "The Square Deal invites you-all to tea! It's my hour to pour and all you gotta do is name your poison and hold your cups. There's power enough in my licker to hoist you out o' your boots."

"I'm wringing wet as a fresh skinned hide, outside," commented an old miner, "but on the inside I'm drier than Phay-row's mummy."

"Put a dash of bitters in mine, Cool," cried another, "I feels this minute like I'm the old Peppermint Pete!"

"Never mind the bitters, Cool, and

you can pass that bottle over me, under me, round me, through me, but don't never pass it *by* me," mocked a third.

"That's me, too," laughed a red-headed desert rat. "I feels all different which ways. And if I was twins I couldn't feel worse. Gimme a drink that'll cock up my head like a stud parrot."

"I'm cursed with a figure so that any man can wear my clothes," laughed a voice, "but you've got to search many a man's country before you get a hombre what's got a thirst to equal this one I'm packing. My stomach's so hot that I'll bet the first drink hits bottom of my breadbasket, and I'll think a whistle has blowed."

"Get agile," laughed Cool, "and amble up to his mahogany. If you-all don't paint landscapes in your brain, and go to wandering into distant cities of splendors and spenders it'll be because you think that I'm only giving you sample copies of this licker. I ain't a-going to track up my eyes with crows' feet because you get sociable with them bottles, no! Let's get a right good flying start and let no man die of etiquette! Come on, everybody! None of you'll have to wait for the second table!"

And how they came! They stood six deep and a line reached far into the street. Soon the air was filled with mirth and song.

When all were calmed down, and the bottles were moving amid the hilarious miners, Cool Herbert motioned to the Kid who came toward him immediately.

"Now you tell me who it was what owned that hand you saw," he said. "Tell it quick."

"That's what I don't know," answered the Kid. "I seen the hand a-laying along that door's edge, but there was such a mixup I couldn't tell who that fist belonged to. But, Cool, them was the fingers! Ugh! How they screamed out loud at me!"

"You're sure, eh? Dead certain?"

"You bet! I seen 'em last night! Them same ones in that room, over yonder! And they was the identical fingers I seen that night at Tilton's. And it seems like I've seen 'em before, too!"

"Then," said Cool, "if that hand is in this town we gotta get a look at it. Say nothing, do nothing, that will bring Lordsburg to realize what we're up to, and by all means you keep from getting into any kind of jam. Them fellas that was in that room with me, a while ago, has agreed to throw a guard all around this building, night and day, till we gets through with this gang; but you can see that if you gets plugged that our only hope of catching that killer will flutter away like a dry leaf before a wind."

"I've had enough excitement for one day," answered the Kid. "But how you figger we oughta find that hand?"

"I ain't right sure, yet," said Cool, "but the coils is slowly tightening, and I'm a liar if my old head won't show me a way right soon. He's in town, that much is a cinch. Now the thing to do is to find him."

"We can go to peeping at everybody's hands, can't we?"

"Right from Heaven, that was!" exclaimed Cool. "Run along now and let me think. Peeping at hands! Boy, that was a immortal hunch. And I think I got the answer. If you goes to peeping at hands, somebody'll peep at you across a gun barrel. If you is some place, and then you sees everybody's hands, that's safe, sane and satisfying and I believes will bring home the bacon. There's more, boys, there sure is. I'll go get it now. Come on one of you weight lifters and carry in a coupla cases in each hand." Cool shouted these last words at the crowd as he hurried away from the Kid.

CHAPTER X

Cool Herbert's Cunning

IN VIOLATION of Cool Herbert's admonition the Texas Kid wandered up town, after supper, and with Alabam strolled along the sidewalk now crowded with a laughing jostling crowd.

Lordsburg, Black Pete and the toughs of the town had been curiously absent from the main street all of the day. This fact was what had led the Kid to take the stroll; then he wanted to help Alabam buy Aggie a ring, for a wedding had been definitely decided upon as soon as a minister could be reached. One was said to be on his way into Paradise from San Marcial and Alabam avowed that he was going to have an engagement period as well as a long-time married life, afterward.

Filled with a sense of security, because of the citizens' posse which patrolled the street, everywhere, the Kid gave no heed to the caution of Cool. As they were coming out of a store where a few diamond rings were for sale, and Alabam was exhibiting a huge diamond to a few of his friends beneath a store-porch light, Nebraska and the marshal of Alamogordo passed down the opposite side of the street, walking close to the building fronts, and vanished between two buildings.

Exactly as they disappeared Pedro Sanchez was seen to dart into a building, a darkened building, and to close its door after him. A moment later Pedro's head protruded from a second story window.

Then something happened in the street.

A revolver shot rang out. A man's voice raised in a curse drew the attention of the pedestrians to a pair of men further down the street toward The Square Deal. The instant was electric, the scene contagious in its excitement and to this Alabam and the Kid, as well as those who filled the street, became victims. A rush was made for points of security from flying bullets, but at the same time positions were selected from which the fight could be viewed. In a split second the street was free of all men save two, and these stood ten feet apart a short distance below the Kid and Alabam.

The combatants were now recognized. One was a deputy sheriff, and the other a gambler from The Long Island. This last figure the Kid seemed to remember; it looked familiar. Of a sudden he knew.

"That's the fella," he said, "that I seen run away from Old Jimmy after the old pilgrim had been knocked to his knees. I'm dead certain of that, now. Whatta you s'pose is coming off?"

"When crooks fall out, you know, Tex," began Alabam, but he did not finish. Lordsburg darted from some place and shouted at the two men in the street.

"Put them guns up and separate, you two," he cried. "If you don't, I'll take a hand in this fight! Put them guns up, I tell you!"

"It's fight, now, Lordsburg," said the gambler. "This man of yours has been on the prod long enough. If he's got any gravel in his craw he'll stand where he is and shoot this out with me. You give us the signal when to start."

"That suits me," said the deputy with a snarl.

"You mean to do it at ten feet?" yelled Lordsburg. "You're both crazy. You, fella," he shouted at the gambler, "come back this way about ten paces. If it's fight you want, and fight you'll have, I'll start you off, but you gotta do it at something but suicide distance. Walk this way ten steps."

The gambler moved back until his

form was nearly opposite the position of Alabam and the Kid. Then the sheriff spoke in a voice which carried throughout the hushed street. "When I counts three you can start at the last count and keep on shooting till you're satisfied. Both of you ready?"

"Ready!" cried the gambler.

"Ready!" exclaimed the deputy.

"One!" said the sheriff, in a loud, screeching tone.

"Two!"

THEN from a region to the side of the deputy two rapid shots rang out. Lordsburg never emitted the third count. But his head flashed about and he stared at the spot from which had echoed the reverberations of the twin discharges.

The duelists were amazed, stunned, it seemed and then the deputy started toward Lordsburg. Out of the darkened building sprang the form of Pedro Sanchez. His voice was screaming and he was heading, on the dead run, for the spot where the Kid stood.

"Drop back! señor," he cried. "Drop back. They are trying to kill you!"

The Kid was jerked into the crowd by a member of the citizens' posse; but Alabam leaped forward and pressed his gun into the ribs of the gambler who was watching Pedro approach. "Gimme that gun, fella," said Alabam. The gambler delivered his gun. Possemen crowded around Lordsburg and the deputy. Alabam stood in the light of a store punching shells out of the gambler's gun. These he held up for the crowd to stare at as Pedro reached his side and whispered something into his ear.

"Here you are, men," shouted Alabam. "All these shells is blanks. If you'll get that deputy's gun you'll find it loaded with that kinda ammunition, too."

The crowd gasped, then laughed. The deputy started away.

"Stop him!" cried Alabam. "He was in with this tin horn to pull off a fake duel in this street while two fellas over there shot the Kid and maybe me. If you'll look back of that store sign, down thataway, you'll find Nebraska Slim and that marshal from Alamogordo laying on the ground with a bullet from this Mexican's gun in each of them. He shot them as they was drawing a bead, through knotholes at Tex. They was to shoot, I reckon, just as these birds in the street got the go-ahead sign from Lordsburg Little, at the count of three."

A roar as from the throats of maddened bulls went up from the crowd. Lordsburg and his deputy ducked between two buildings and vanished into the darkness. Men hurried to the spot where Sanchez pointed and there pulled out Nebraska Slim and the former marshal. Both men had been wounded through a shoulder. And both were in mortal terror of the mob and its violence; but the Kid and Alabam pushed their way to the wounded men and prevailed upon the citizens of Paradise to spare them. They were carried into a doctor's office where medical attention was given them.

Pedro joined the Kid as he and Alabam went back to The Square Deal. "You sure saved me that time, *compadre,*" said the Kid, "and I reckon that evens us up for what I once did for you."

"God is very good," murmured the Mexican. "For long tam I am hope for the mo-ment to come when Pedro can do some ting verra big for de keed, for Texas Keed. Dese night she come —dat tam, Pedro is plenty glad, in deep in hees heart. Too bad my bullets she go no place what I aim. I tink I shoot both dese fallars through de neck. Bah, I shoot in de shoulder. *Muy malo!*"

"No, it ain't bad," laughed the Kid. "They'll tell us what we want to know,

Pedro. And they sure knows a-plenty."

"Quien sabe?" said Pedro. "Mebbe you right. Dead mans no talk! Dese fallars feel rope squeeze neck den they talk like little kids. But de wan fallar I want for catch he is gone. I spik of Rowdy Evans. On my back is manny scar from his quirt, that time. Mebbe I get heem."

"I ain't forgetting Rowdy," said the Kid. "Not for one minute am I forgetting him. I'll see you later, *mi amigo!"*

PEDRO touched his hat. *Mi amigo! Mi Amigo!* My friend! The Kid had called him that! The Mexican stored the word in his mind like a sacred thing. To be a friend of this boy was to him a glorious achievement. He felt proud as he went back to his kitchen.

"Mostly," said Alabam, as he and the Kid entered The Square Deal, "them greasers has a single track mind. If they loves, they loves; and if they hates, oh, oh—they takes twelve hours apart at the job, every day. If it hadn't been for him, Texas, you might be digesting a forty-five slug, long about this time. But then, men as is slated to be hung will never die any other way but dancing on the air!"

"There's Cool," whispered the Kid. "And look at the dirty eyes he's making at me. He's a-wanting us, I reckon. Come on, but don't tell him nothing. Let him do the talking."

"I gotta show him the chunk of ice I bought for Aggie, ain't I?"

"Alabam, if I was you I'd take that thing and back up Aggie in a corner and wish it on her finger. I wouldn't go around showing that to everybody but her."

"Tex, you got about as much sentiment as a wet rope. Now what's the use of buying a engagement ring unless you shows it to the multitude? I and Aggie shore will see plenty of it in the years to come, unless we goes broke; then we'll show it to some loaning uncle and trade it for a ticket and some cash."

"Alabam! Oh, Alabam!" Aggie's voice called wildly into the saloon.

"I'm coming! Tex, I think you're right. I'll show her," and Alabam left The Square Deal on the run.

"Didn't I tell you not to stray about this town?" asked Cool Herbert. "Now didn't I?"

"You sure did; but I was out with Alabam getting his girl a diamond. He wanted me to come along and see that there wasn't any flaws in the dern thing. Didja hear about what come off?"

"What I oughta do with you is to knock down both your ears; cut off all your corners and fill up your hollows with 'em; work you over with a hickory rod and teach you how to multiply by handing you five times five with these!" Cool shook his thin, bony knuckles under the Kid's nose. "Here I was, a-panting, and a-gulping, trying to hold my breath, and having none to hold, and all the time a-praying, yes I was, a-praying that nothing would happen to you. Daggone it, boy, I was so skeered. But it's been thataway, all my life. Whenever I loved anything that ran about on legs, something happened to it."

"Was you worrying like a woman about me?"

"You derned young pothound—when you walked into my place, that time in Vegas, and I got a good look at you, why, you moved into my heart and my heart moved out. I may be silly, but if I ever wanted to daddy anything it's a lowdown, longbacked, six-to-the-dozen kid like you. And if wet nursing you won't keep you entire then I'll get me a footrope and picket you out on this bar room floor and ride herd on you all the time till I gets these weasels

shunted someplace safe. Now you listen! Things is developing."

"Go on, old pilgrim, you might be weak in the lungs but you're no heavier in the heart than I am. And sometime I ain't saying when, but sometime I'm going to sing you a song. Didja know I could sing?"

"Whatta you sing?"

"'The Girl I Left Behind Me,' 'Father, Dear Father, Come Home with Me Now,' 'Call Me Pet Names,' 'The Straight Out Democrat,' and a lot more," answered the Kid.

"I'll get a 'G string' for my guitar and we'll do that, 'Girl I Left Behind Me,' sometime. I sings a pretty fair sort o' alto, if I ain't having one of my bad spells."

"Never mind your alto, what's this about things developing?"

"I'VE sent some fellas out to round up every man what was in this room with Black Pete and Lordsburg. You slide over to them four fellas next to the wall and they'll take you back to where the old sawbones Doc Gilley is working on Nebraska and that ex-marshal. Look at their hands and see if they matches up with what you carries in your mind of Jackson Tilton's killer. Go on, now, and then come right back here on the run. Things is going to spill, scatter, run about, and then run together and settle down. Tonight's the night and if it's like I think it is we'll sure have a night of it. Looka yonder! That's the stage! And ain't that a preacher on top with old Keno Jack, the driver?"

"It sure is. Maybe we can get Aggie and Alabam to be spliced in a public sort o' way, say, right over yonder near the piano. You and me could sing a song for 'em, eh?"

"Get out, Sonny, and come back, safe!"

The Kid joined four men who had been waiting for him near the door. With these he went to the doctor's office where he examined the hands and fingers of the two wounded outlaws. Neither was the man he was after. Then he returned to The Square Deal. One by one men began dropping into the place where they were ranged carelessly about the room.

Soon a shouting sounded through the street. The captain of the citizens' committee was approaching with Black Pete, Lordsburg, the undersheriff, Omaha Mose, Rowdy Evans and the other men who had accompanied Black Pete to The Square Deal. And surging about these men were scores of frenzied townsmen and prospectors. It looked as though a wholesale lynching might come off any instant. But the prisoners were rushed into Cool Herbert's place and there crowded into a corner where a guard was placed over them.

Cool brought out a small table, set a chair in front of it, and then, to the Kid's surprise, laid the blotter he had taken from Tilton's desk on the table. This done, Cool stepped back and addressed the crowd.

"Men, you-all knows of Jackson Tilton's murder, but you don't know how it was done and who done it. Neither does I. But right here, and right now, I aims to find out. Tex, come over alongside of me."

The Kid stepped to Cool's side.

"When you sees the fingers you're looking for, you cough, three times, understand? Cough three times!" Cool whispered the instructions in an aside to the Kid.

"O. K.," said the Kid. "Does I stand right here?"

"Right there." Cool placed him to the side and a bit behind the chair. Then Cool said, "Boys, on this blotter is the location Jackson Tilton wrote of that old Spanish mine."

He read a copy of the writing the

blotter contained. The crowd murmured in an angry monotone. But Cool silenced it as he said.

"But that wasn't all the writing Tilton done. Listen to this. What I'm reading now is in the same handwriting as what's on this blotter. And this little paper, all wrinkled up, was removed from Jackson Tilton's dead right hand by the Texas Kid. You boys recalls that Tilton done all his writing with his left hand, don't you?"

"Correct," some one shouted.

"THAT explains how come the note to be in the dead man's right hand. The letter was addressed to me. And the old man was writing it when he heard somebody around. Here it is:

Dear Cool;—

The last few days I've had a premonition of death. Can't explain it. My rheumatism is bad tonight and seems creeping closer to my heart. Thought I ought to write you and tell you. In my will which is in your strong box I have made you my sole heir to all I got; but I never said anything about the gold I discovered. But in a sealed envelope in that box of yours you'll find a dozen or more descriptions of good locations all in your name and mine and I've set up stakes on each of these. If anything happens to me you take them location descriptions and file them with Seven-Minute McGowan. Then start the good fellows in Paradise to that country, for the hills is lousy with gold and there's plenty claims for everybody in camp.

If you'll remember the time I brought in some nuggets and flake gold and displayed this in your window, you'll remember me telling you of a Mexican who came to me and said his forefathers used to take gold out of these hills. I kidded him and one of my cowboys took a pick up to town and him and the blacksmith worked a Spanish mark on the side of that pick and told the greaser I had found it in some old diggings. That cowboy also told the Mexican that I had the location of that mine in my safe and slept with a scatter gun in the same room with it.

Day before yesterday that greaser stopped me on the street and talked wild and looked bad. You see him, Cool, and tell him my ground ain't never had a pick in it. I don't want to worry him no more. But he never had no forefathers who had gold in this country, for I found out that he is a orphan from Tucson and doesn't know who his people were. Still I don't like to fool with a crazy man like him.

Another thing you ought to know. Just in case I am found dead, sometime. That is, found dead because somebody butchered me. I've made a description of that old salted mine at the junction of Right Hand Creek and Apache Fork. I told you about that mine. The one I mean what I bought from the old desert rat who used a 10 gauge shot gun filled with flake gold and gold shavings as a load, to spatter gold all through the seams and honeycomb formation in that cave up on Chimney Rock.

That description I've written and placed in a sealed envelope; but I wrote it heavy and blotted it on a clean blotter and I keep that blotter always on my desk. It's a cinch that the man who kills me, if he gets that paper, or if I gives it to him, will file a claim with Seven-Minute McGowan and this letter to you will be mighty hard for him to ride around, any way he tries.

Maybe I'm an old fool. But I'm skeery tonight I should not have let all my boys gone to town. I just heard a noise outside, Cool. There it is again. Now I thought I seen a masked head in the mirror. It was just a flash. He's back of the bookcase, behind the door in the next room—

"Right there he quit writing and must of crumpled that note in his hand," said Cool. "Now, boys, the things is—who did that killing? I've got the power of revelation and I can tell when a man is innocent or guilty, providing I have something taken from the place of the crime. For this case, this blotter is all I needs. The guilty man is in this room and I intends to name him, right now."

LORDSBURG'S head jerked up. Black Pete's tongue wet his lips. Sudden, and unmistakable fear stamped the faces of the rest of the gang. "You, Lordsburg, take this chair," ordered Cool. Men shoved Lordsburg to the chair. "Lay your hands on that blotter."

Lordsburg obeyed.

"Now blindfold me," said Cool. "I gotta work in the dark." A bandana was tied over his eyes. Then he spoke, after a moment's silence. "Lordsburg did not use that knife. Black Pete's next!"

Black Pete took a seat and stretched his hands upon the blotter. "He didn't kill Tilton," rang Cool Herbert's uncanny tones. Pete leaped away in a joyous frame of mind.

"Now bring any and all of them," said Cool in an inhuman squeal.

The undersheriff, Omaha Mose, and seven others faced the test and all of them smiled as Cool acquitted them of blame. Then came Rowdy Evans in a halting, eye-shifting, miserable approach to the testing chair.

By this time the still, tense, awesome suspense of the room was like an evil thing, like something monstrous, unheard of, and ugly beyond comprehension. The eyes of Rowdy suggested those of some dog cornered by many men. Yet his hands went upon the blotter and his eyes popped and the lids went wide exposing the whites of the balls. He was staring at the writing, the upside down writing, on the blotter. And as he shook in an agony of fear a gasp arose from those who were watching him.

His hands suddenly began to squirm and twitch. They knotted and the muscles moved beneath the skin. As if a magic were at work on those fingers these changed, instantly, to a bloody red; a crimson it was, like a smudge of stagnant blood. It whisked away, in a pulsing movement, and a dirty purple took its place. Then back it flew in that detestable and evil looking red.

As a face will flush in anger, shame, or excitement, and then will blanch to a bloodless white, so changed the hands of Rowdy Evans to the amazement of the crowded room. Men's breath came and went in great and audible intakes and exhausts. One knew immediately that there, seated before that blotter, was the being who had killed Jackson Tilton.

And then the Texas Kid coughed. Coughed three times in a low, and hacking manner; for what he was staring at had nearly robbed him of his power of motion. But on the heels of those coughs came Cool Herbert's voice as he jerked off the bandage which covered his eyes.

"The man who killed Jackson Tilton sits at the table now!"

"It's a lie!" shrieked Rowdy Evans. "I didn't! I didn't!"

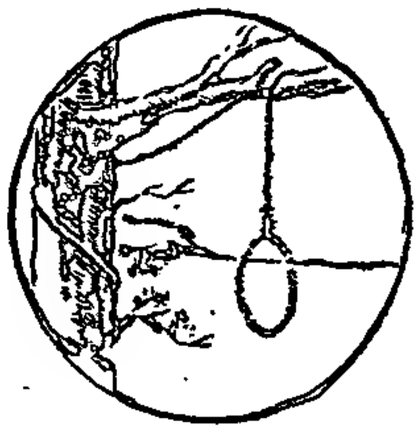
He tried to leap out of his seat, but a complete fear-paralysis hit him and he dropped back and slumped far down in the chair.

"You bet he did!" yelled Old Jimmy from the edge of the crowd. "When Tex was telling of the hand he seen stealing the sacks in the storage room I was trying to think where I'd seen a hand like that. Now I remembers. It was down at The Long Island one night. Rowdy Evans got mad at a gambler and as his hands was laying on the faro table I seen 'em change from blood to rotten purple, right in front of my eyes. Not once, but a dozen times, quick!"

"And the hand I seen at the window in Tilton's house," said the Kid, "was the same hand that you-all seen change color on that table. There ain't no doubt in my mind now."

Rowdy was gasping. His jaw had dropped, literally dropped, and now it lay nearly upon the base of his throat. Its muscular control had been lost through fear and the jaw now sagged wide open and had drooped at least three inches below its normal extended position. Slowly the man gained control of himself. His eyes went furtively about the room, went sneakingly from face to face and they were met with wild looks of animal-like fury. Rowdy glanced at Lordsburg and then at Black Pete. Of a sudden he emitted a cry, yelled, out of a spasm of effort.

"I DID kill him; but I didn't mean to. I'll swear I didn't. Lordsburg and Black Pete found out that Tilton had discovered a rich field and was keeping it a secret. They heard one of Tilton's cowboys telling that Mexican that the old man kept the secret of his gold locked in his safe. I agreed to go out and make the old man open the safe. I got in the house and he heard me. I stepped out and told him what I wanted and he gave me a letter. I opened it and was reading it when he reached up and pulled the sack off my head and seen who I was. Then I had to kill him. But the next minute I heard a noise in the



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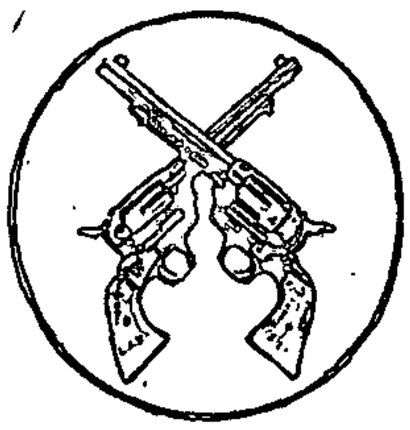

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yard, tried to run out the front way, seen this Texas Kid coming, and I ducked back and was just crawling onto my bronc when I heard a gun crack. Then I tore away. But somehow that note fell out of my chaps' pocket and when I got to town I had no idea what I'd seen on that sheet of paper. I remembered Right Hand Creek, but that was all."

"Anything more?" asked Cool Herbert deliberately.

"I've always had that bloodrush to my hands when I got excited. It's a birth mark, I reckon. Everytime I gets anyways mad or in any kind of excitement my hands changes color that way."

"Did Lordsburg and Black Pete tell you to kill Tilton?" asked Cool.

"No," said Rowdy, "but they sent me out to get that description. They planned the robbery of your storeroom and helped pack out the sacks."

"Didn't Lordsburg plot to free that Mexican and then follow and kill him?" asked Cool.

"Yes, he did. We got some Mexicans to saw the bars and when the greaser got away on a horse the undersheriff and some deputies tailed him and caught him as he was climbing the rocks to the cave on Chimney Rock. Black Pete didn't believe Nebraska, at first, that Texas had a note, but when he was searched and that note found, Pete, me, and Nebraska hit out for that cave but found out what was going to be done with the Mexican. We hadn't said nothing to Lordsburg and I thinks that Pete intended to doublecross him and keep what he found; but them boys of Lordsburg's who tailed the Mexican spoiled this and we located in everybody's name with Seven-Minute McGowan."

"Anybody want to ask anything?" queried Cool.

Silence. Then some of Black Pete's and Lordsburg's men made a dash for the door; but they were knocked down and pulled into the street. Lordsburg and Black Pete were bound and with Rowdy Evans taken from The Square Deal.

Within an hour frontier justice, stark, swift and complete, had claimed its penalty. Rowdy Evans, Lordsburg and Black Pete were hanged from a crosstree of the town's flag-pole. The lesser outlaws were given twenty stripes with a blacksnake whip and forced to leave camp with their lives as forfeits should they ever return. Nebraska and the exmarshal were to follow when able.

The new minister gave Christian comfort to the outlaws before the ropes had been placed about their necks and as the mob broke up and was scattering about town Alabam sought the preacher and asked him to officiate at a wedding. When the clergyman expressed consternation at the suggestion Alabam quieted his protest.

"Padre," he said, "we gotta take these mining camps as we finds 'em. If you aims to stay here and preach the Gospel you gotta be ready to step in at a hanging, a shooting, a wedding or a funeral, most any old time. And you gotta be r'aring to go any hour. In all these camps it's day all day, in the day time, and there ain't no night a-tall. Come on, parson, and splice Aggie and I, won't you? There's fifty dollars of the best yellow gold ever a preacher tucked in the tail of his coat, if you will."

The clergyman smiled.

"On one condition," he said.

"Granted," said Alabam. "Name it!"

"That you use your best efforts to see that I get a place to preach the word of God in this sinful hole and that you and your wife come to church on Sunday as long as you are in camp?"

"Come on," yelled Alabam, grasping the minister's hand. "I wanna show you my Aggie."

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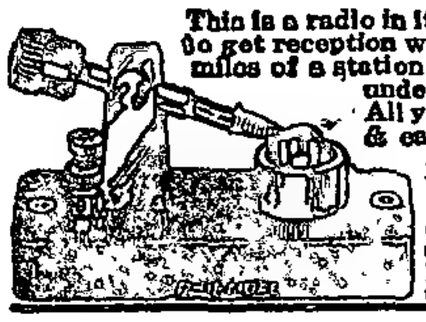

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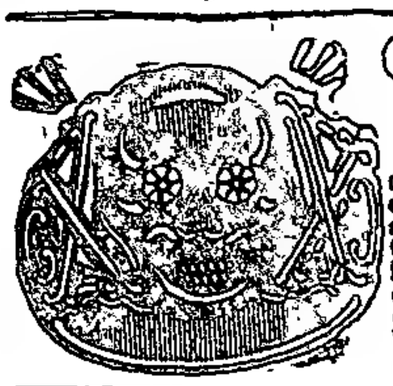

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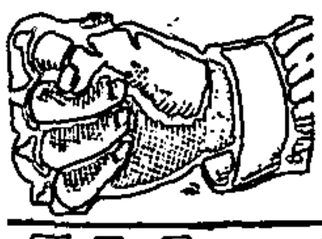

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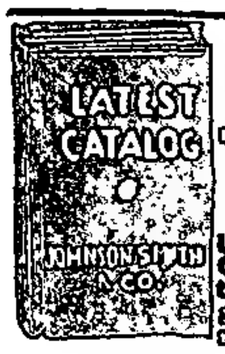

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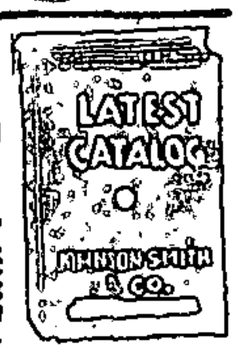

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Never Say Die

by RALPH R. PERRY

Rustled, trail pardner murdered, Pavi ties his holsters down and goes on the prod!

QUICK as an eye-wink Pavi found himself awake. Wide awake, with his body tense beneath the blanket, and his head, though it still touched the saddle he had drawn up for a pillow, not resting upon it. Not the least drowsiness lingered in muscle or brain; yet in the tiny camp-fire, embers still glowed faintly. He could not have been asleep for more than three hours. It was still dark; Bullhead Clark would not call him for his turn at night herd until moonrise. The cattle were quiet. There was not even the clicking of horns to warn that they were rising to their feet. Nothing was wrong as far as could be learned from sight or sound, yet Pavi Jones knew such sudden, vivid wakefulness meant danger. Some subconscious sentinel had roused him; in a moment or two his senses would confirm the warning.

While he held his breath his mind raced over the events of the preceding day. It was still two weeks before fall roundup. He had been sent with his sidekicker, Bullhead Clark, into the roughs on the border of the Lazy B range to pick up horses for the remuda, but they had found the tangle of draws

and rocky hills swarming with Lazy B cows. Four or five would break out of a thicket that should not have sheltered more than one; the punchers would start along a wash and find twenty cows high-tailing it before them.

Someone had swept the range and thrown the cattle into the hills. It might be the Curry gang from the Hole-in-the-Wall; it might be Bridger or Conover or one of the other nesters. No one knew who was doing the rustling that was crippling big outfits like the Lazy B or the Box 4—but whoever it was, Pavi had recognized that a big steal was going on. If the Lazy B had waited until roundup there would have been no cattle in the roughs. To prevent a wholesale rustler's drive Bullhead and he had combed the draws themselves, and though both were dog-tired at sunset, Pavi insisted they night herd the two hundred head collected. Bullhead had drawn first watch.

There it came! The slow hoofbeats of a horse, being ridden at a walk toward the fire. The sound was very faint. Pavi would not have been able to hear it at all if his ear had not been against the saddle, which in turn rested on the ground. The rider, Pavi judged, was about fifty yards away, and that he was a stranger the puncher had no doubt. Pavi could hear his own mount pawing on the opposite side of the fire, and if it had been Bullhead riding in, the horse would be coming at a lope. No—someone, some rustler probably, thought he was asleep by the fire and was stalking him. Pavi reached for his gun and started to draw himself out of his blankets. That rustler was going to get the surprise of his life!

Off toward the herd the silence was shattered by the *boom* of a Winchester carbine. Three other reports followed the first in a ragged volley; a Colt six-gun barked once and was drowned in a blast of rifle fire.

"Hi-yee-yip!" shouted three or four voices; Pavi heard the thump of a lariat against the flank of a cow. Then out of the darkness a single horse and rider galloped headlong upon him.

The whole thing occurred so quickly that Pavi had no more than time to leap from the blankets. One second he was listening to a faint hoofbeat, the next instant the horse and rider had passed too quickly for Pavi to raise his gun and fire. No shot came from the strange rider. His arm swept out, a rope struck Pavi across the chest and began to tighten.

THE noose was well thrown, but thanks to his alertness Pavi managed to escape where a man suddenly awakened from sleep would have been twitched from his feet and dragged helpless across the ground. At first touch of the rope Pavi dove to the ground and snatched off the noose with both hands. He had to drop his gun, but immediately he began pawing through the sage to recover it—knowing all the while there was still light enough from the dying campfire to make his body an easy mark for a revolver shot from the darkness.

The shot came—but it was not aimed at Pavi. He saw a length of orange flame split the darkness twenty feet away. By the flash of it he recognized the head of his own hobbled pony which dropped dead as the .45 slug struck it behind the ear, and glimpsed the thin, hook nosed face of the strange rider.

"Damn yuh—oh damn yuh!" Pavi shouted. "Yuh damn' hoss shooter, wait till I find my gun!" Maddened by the wanton murder of his horse he raked the ground right and left. Suddenly his fingers closed on the butt of his gun, and Pavi rose to his feet and took deliberate aim. He had recognized the face by the gun flash, but it meant

nothing to him that he was shooting at a neighbor whom he always had liked. He knew his body was outlined against the firelight, and wondered that Slim Conover did not fire instead of whirling his pony on its haunches to escape. But beyond all else Pavi wanted to get the man who had shot his horse. He pulled the trigger. Slim threw himself forward in the saddle, but it was to shelter himself behind the pony like an Indian, not because he was hit. Pavi felt he had missed; fired twice more, and missed again—and wondered, enraged as he was, why Slim had tried to capture him at first, and now refused to return his fire.

But Pavi had no time for speculation. The yells and blows of the rustlers who had attacked the herd had gotten the cattle on their feet and stampeded them up the draw, and the men driving them did not share Slim's scruples. The *zizzup* of a bullet within an inch of Pavi's head made him jump behind the shelter of his dead pony. Four men passed at a gallop, and each emptied his gun at the cowboy.

"Want I should git him?" one of them yelled.

"Nah—we'll tend tuh him if he follows!" roared a hoarse, bass voice.

Pavi, whose gun was empty and who would have been helpless if they had rushed him, swore with grim relief. Rustlers and cattle went crashing up the draw. The smell of dust, the sound of galloping hooves, died away. Over the horizon the rim of the moon began to light the world.

"That one rifle shot—I reckon yuh got Bullhead," Pavi whispered to himself. "An' if yuh did I'll foller yuh if you put the devil hisself to guardin' yore back trail!"

But how to follow? For with moonlight to aid him, Pavi soon found Bullhead. The friend with whom he had shared blankets and tobacco for two years lay on the ground like a heap of discarded clothes, with a wound in his back and a bullet in his heart.

"They starlighted yuh against the sky an' shot yuh down without a chanst," Pavi muttered. He unclasped the dead fingers from the butt of the six-gun that Bullhead had drawn and fired with his last strength, and slipped it purposefully into his own holster. "I'll git them with your gun, old-timer," Pavi promised. "Yuh didn't want to roundup them cows. Yuh'd been sleepin' at the Lazy B now if it hadn't been fer me. But I'll square it for yuh!"

But how? While Pavi was wrapping his friend's body in a blanket, while he staggered with it to a tree and hoisted it into the branches where it would be out of the reach of coyotes, even after Bullhead's horse had circled back, and after a heartrending hour of failures he had succeeded in roping it, he was wondering how he could pay his self imposed debt to his friend. He was alone, and thirty miles from the Lazy B ranch. If he rode back to get help, the delay would permit the rustlers to escape. If he followed their trail he would be taking a chance great enough to daunt a posse of determined men. To cut across country and intercept them was impossible. They would drive the cattle nearly as fast as his exhausted pony could travel and though he was convinced they would head for the railroad there were several points within a radius of a hundred miles from which the stolen cows could be shipped.

FOR in only one way could two hundred head of cattle be stolen in one raid. Fall roundup was approaching, the railroad would have an abundance of cattle cars on the sidings, and a large shipment at this time would excite little notice. The rustlers would drive the cows into the hills, stop for a day in some out of the way place to alter

the brands, and then rush the cattle directly aboard the cars. Within forty-eight hours the Lazy B stock would vanish—be out of the State on the way to Chicago and the stockyards. The scheme necessitated the cooperation of a large gang, one of whom must be a corrupt freight agent, but it had the advantage of speed. The rustlers were safe unless pursuit caught up to them while they were changing the brands, and to preclude that possibility they would post a guard on their back trail.

The trail of the cattle was clearly marked in the moonlight, but Pavi did not follow it. Somewhere in the hills, he knew, it would lead up a narrow canyon, or skirt a nest of boulders where one rifleman could hold an entire posse at bay for hours. The rustlers were expecting him to follow—and be shot down; but though the cold anger in Pavi's heart made him feel equal to fighting them all singlehanded, he had no intention of committing suicide. Instead of following in the rustlers' tracks he headed his pony toward a high butte which rose ruggedly to the westward in the general direction the murderers had taken. Old Muckstick Jenkins had a claim on the rocky heights which overlooked the entire country to the north and west. Muckstick was an early riser. He, or Kate Shailer or her sickly brother "Charley" would notice the dust of the cattle drive, and with their information to assist him Pavi figured he might parallel the trail without following it, and slip by the guard.

Saving his pony as much as he could Pavi rode all night. Dawn found him at the foot of the butte. Shortly after sunrise he was within hail of the prospector's cabin, but before he could announce his coming Muckstick appeared in the doorway and waved a red-shirted arm in greeting.

"Light an' eat a bean," the old man yelled. "Put yore hoss behind the cabin —we-all is jest settin' down to breakfast." The sixty-year-old prospector wagged his beard as Pavi rode up. "Heh, heh," he cackled, digging Pavi in the ribs the instant the puncher dismounted, "takes a purty gal tuh bring comp'ny!"

"There's another horse here—been ridden hard, too," observed Pavi. Suspicion hardened his voice and drew his black eyebrows together in a frown that the old prospector perceived—but misinterpreted widely.

"Shore, sense Kate come I'm humpbacked totin' wash water," grinned Muckstick. "Cain't hardly expect tuh see her alone, Pavi. Better slick yore mustache an' git ready to act like you was a human."

"Cross C pony, Conover brand," Pavi muttered. "'Tain't Slim Conover, is it?"

"Beans is gittin' cold," the other replied enigmatically, and re-entered the cabin. But Pavi hesitated.

A gunflash makes uncertain light, yet Slim's lean, hawknosed face was hard to mistake, and Pavi was positive the boy had been with the rustlers. The Conovers were nesters, with no love for big outfits like the Lazy B and it was natural for them to pick up a few head of stock if they found a chance. But though Slim was bitter and reckless on occasions, he was no cold killer like the gang who had downed Bullhead. On the other hand Slim had had nothing to do with that killing. He had been trying to rope Pavi—when it would have been easier to shoot. Yes, and he hadn't fired even after Pavi himself had gone into action.

The puzzled cowboy smoothed his black mustache, as Muckstick had suggested. If it were Slim inside, he had a number of pointed questions to ask, and he did not want to take off his gun as politeness required him to do before sitting down at table. And yet, around the saddle horn of the Cross C horse was

hung a belt and gun. Slim would be unarmed, too. Pavi slowly removed his own belt, which had Bullhead's revolver in the holster, and thrust his own gun into the folds of the slicker tied behind the cattle. Even if Slim were a rustler he had no cause to shoot on sight. Just now he was on the trail of bigger game.

"HEH! Took yuh long enough to git ready," chortled Muckstick when Pavi appeared at last in the cabin doorway.

"How do you do, Mr. Jones. Come sit down, your coffee's all poured," said Kate Shailer. She spoke with great friendliness, for she was eighteen and not long from the East, and she admired the handsome puncher. Pavi's black eyes were sparkling; the lips under the small black mustache were ordinarily turned up at the corners from a dry, reserved good humor, and though only of average height he had a breadth of shoulder and leanness of body that made every movement tell of lithe strength. Altogether he was a man to capture a girl's fancy, and for an instant it piqued Kate that he scarcely glanced at her. Then, while she was in the act of handing him his coffee, her intuition sensed the hostility that had suddenly charged the air of the cabin.

It is to her credit that she set down the coffee before him as though his had been an ordinary call. But Pavi did answer her greeting. He had not seated himself. On the opposite side of the table Slim Conover had risen to his feet and was meeting Pavi's narrow lidded scrutiny with defiance—though he strove to keep his features casual. Slim was not sure whether Pavi had recognized him during the raid or not. He hoped that he had kept his identity secret, but the first glance of the cold black eyes showed him his error. He was unarmed, and Pavi was between him and the cabin door.

From his seat next to his sister Charley Shailer kept glancing from one man to the other as though the sight fascinated him. Little by little he worked his chair back out of the line between them, and his thin face flushed with the high color of his disease, wrinkled into lines of consternation and terror. For ten seconds—so long that their hostility became first noticeable, and then terrifying to the other three—the two young punchers glared at one another.

"Why—what's the matter?" Kate stammered. Charley trod heavily on her foot, and shook his head, but the girl was not to be silenced thus easily. "Why, I thought—you told me, Charley—that the big ranches and the nesters had stopped fighting!" she protested.

Muckstick acted more wisely. He opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle and glasses.

"How for a snort o' good likker!" he cried with an assumed cheeriness. "Fill 'em up, now!"

The old prospector was trying to invoke that article of the range code which decrees that once two men have drunk together any quarrel they may have had previously is thereby foregone, and he was pleased when Slim reached for a glass.

But Pavi shook his head. "Now, I don't drink before breakfast," he said curtly. "Muckstick, the Lazy B has jest lost a mort o' cows—I dropped by to head off the rustlers before they kin git 'em to the railroad. Happen you saw any dust—off toward the Hole-in-the-Wall, likely, jest about sunup?"

"Head 'em off alone?" exclaimed the old man—and hesitated, thinking swiftly. "No, Pavi, don't know ez I did see nothing. Not to be sure on!"

"But I did!" cried Kate. "You remember, I thought the grass might be afire, over toward the Gap. That must have been—oh!" An ejaculation of pain ended the sentence, and Kate

looked indignantly at her brother. "Why do you step on my foot, Charley?" she finished.

"Reckon I gotta be ridin'," muttered Slim.

"Wait!" said Pavi—with such menace and authority in his tone that the red-headed, lean-faced puncher shrugged again and refilled his coffee cup. "I'll ride on with you in a minute," Pavi added.

THOUGH he had been unable to figure out what Slim was doing at the cabin—unless the boy had been one of the men who had thrown the Lazy B cattle into the hills, and joined the raid only because the unexpected appearance of Bullhead and himself disarranged the rustler's plans—Pavi had no intention of allowing Slim to ride ahead and warn the rustlers of his coming, possibly to reinforce the guardian of the back trail. So he snatched a few mouthfuls of food, drank his coffee in long gulps, and pushed back his stool.

"I'm obliged to yuh, ma'am," he remarked to Kate with curt politeness, and strode toward the door. "Yuh coming, Slim?"

Slim slipped off his stool like a flash and crowded out of the door on Pavi's heels. He was abreast of the Lazy B puncher before Pavi could turn the nearest corner of the cabin, but once the two were side by side they slowed their pace by mutual consent. Neither was in advance by an inch as they approached their ponies—on the saddles of which hung their guns.

"Bullhead cashed in his checks," Pavi gritted out of the corner of his mouth.

"He was with the posse what shot my pap, in '92," Slim retorted. "I ain't sheddin' tears—though I don't hold with cold killin'. I never shucked my gun last night."

"You was rustlin'," charged Pavi.

"An' I'll git every damn' Lazy B critter I kin find!" Slim defied him. "The Lazy B tried tuh run my pap an' me outen the country. They—" he stopped, because both had reached their horses. One more step and they would be able to lift off their guns. The eyes of the men met, and in Slim's Pavi saw a grin of triumph shining.

For Pavi's horse had turned, and was facing Slim's mount, so that Pavi's gun hung on the side of the pony farthest from him, practically out of reach, while Slim's was convenient to his hand. The nester had only to reach forward and draw. He could shoot long before Pavi could retrieve his weapon. Pavi, however, was not worried—for his second gun was hidden in his slicker roll, from which it could be drawn more quickly than Slim could pull his from a loosely hung holster.

"Well—start somethin'!" Pavi challenged.

"I told yuh," said the other firmly, "that I didn't do no cold killin'. I'll rustle yore cows ef I kin—an' that's all I aim to do. You kin do what yuh like—I ain't askin' no favors, but this ain't no place to go to slingin' lead. Buckle on yore shootin' iron, an' we'll ride down the trail a piece."

A nod expressed Pavi's approval. He turned his back without another word and put on his gun. He had gathered the reins in his hand when suddenly he chucked.

"I don't savvy you, Slim," he remarked. "An' I don't hold that shootin' again' you personal. Yuh been acting square—an' at that I had yore bet coppered." With a sudden jerk Pavi had the gun out of the slicker and pointed at Slim's chest. The boy's eyes widened, but otherwise he made no sign. "Yo're game," Pavi approved, and thrust the gun back into the slicker pulling the oilskin about it so that it would be difficult to reach. "An' now," he added, "let's ride."

As though he wished in his turn to exhibit good faith, Slim promptly moved ahead, taking the lead down the narrow trail that descended from Muckstick's claim to the valley below. Once arrived at a wide, sandy wash that led into the hills in the direction of the gap, however, he reined in his horse and Pavi moved up abreast.

For Pavi in particular a question of vital importance was about to be settled. The gap, through which Kate Shailer had asserted the Lazy B cattle were driven, was a cleft in the hills as straight and narrow as a knife slash. On either side low, perpendicular cliffs of a reddish volcanic rock extended for many miles; and unless he were to make a detour that would consume nearly a day's time and give the rustlers an opportunity to blot the brands and be gone, he must follow the cattle through the Gap. It was a spot in which a single man with a rifle easily could stand off a posse. There was not a bit of cover for half a mile, until a jumble of boulders was reached close to the crest of the pass. If the rustlers had put a guard on the back trail there he would be popped over like a pigeon—unless—*unless Slim were the guard!*

That was possible. The redheaded nester could not possibly have expected such prompt pursuit by a single man. He had been courting Kate Shailer, Pavi knew. Slim might have been lingering behind for an hour to see his girl.

PAVI said nothing. He walked his horse along at the side of the other with every faculty alert. Though he did not seem to be watching Slim at all, not the least move of the other escaped him. He was riding on the right side, and though his right hand seemed to rest casually enough on the saddle horn, a jerk of his wrist would pull his gun from the holster on his left hip with the muzzle already lined on Slim's body.

For his part, Slim rode straight across the wash. He frowned at the hoof-torn earth as though he was making up his mind, and at last, when they had all but reached the further side, he reined to the left—back toward the Lazy B, and away from the gap.

"We go t'other way," Pavi warned.

Slim's hand tightened on the reins. His horse stopped, and he looked around, square in Pavi's eyes. For a second both men were motionless; then Slim's head jerked in refusal and with that signal his hand streaked across his body to his gun.

"Don't—!" snapped Pavi. He had no time for more than the one word; but it was not the threat in his voice, it was the round black eye of Pavi's pistol thrust in his face that paralyzed Slim with his gun half drawn.

"Yuh hot headed fool!" Pavi growled. "I c'ud ha' filled yuh with lead while yuh was swinging yore shootin' iron across yore hoss's head. Go on, now! Finish yore draw—easy—an' drop yore gun! Yuh should ha' bushwacked me from the gap."

"I knowed yuh was faster," Slim shrugged. "But why didn't yuh shoot?"

"'Cause I knowed I was faster too—an' they's a-plenty I want to find out. Now I got you, I kin ride up on yore gang when they ain't expectin' callers. Where are they?"

"Think so, huh?" was the sullen reply. "They went through the gap."

"I know that. Where they changin' the brands?" Pavi punched his prisoner in the ribs with his gun to give force to his question, but Slim only shook his head and closed his lips defiantly. "I caught yuh rustlin', an' I got a rope," Pavi threatened. "Just because I gave yuh a chanst same's you gave me don't mean I got any objection to see you do a strangle jig. Talk fast, Slim!"

The nester's face paled, so that the freckles on his forehead stood out in

brown contrast to the skin, but for the third time he shook his head. "Yuh kin do as yuh please to me, but yuh'll never get them cows!" he replied, and stopped as though he had made up his mind to say nothing more. After a long pause, however, his anger at his predicament altered his resolution. "Yuh'd never 'a' got me if I had been a-watchin' the back trail!" he burst out. "Yuh sneak up on me when I wasn't watchin' fer nothin', with my gun hung on the fence. I ain't even carryin' a rifle!"

This was true. Pavi had already noticed and wondered at the fact, and though he was tempted to continue the cross-examination, a glance at Slim's face decided him that he would waste his time. The nester had flushed brick red when he realized his outburst had disclosed some genuine information, and now he locked his teeth together lest he be tempted into a second indiscretion.

"What yuh say about them cows mought be so," said Pavi. "The real facts is—no rifle, no trail guard. Jest the same I'm goin' through the gap."

Slim had determined that not another word should pass his lips, but he started at this. Then he shrugged, much as to indicate that if Pavi wanted to get himself killed it was no affair of his.

"Yes, I 'low I made Bullhead a promise," Pavi said. The casualness of the words was belied by the reckless light which sparkled in his eyes. "I allow to run a bluff, Slim—an' yo're my one-card draw. You ride ahead, follerin' the trail. Don't git too far ahead—fifty yards is enough—or I start shootin'. An' if I start shootin' you better *ride,* hombre, 'cause I won't aim to miss. Savvy?"

"Damned if I do," Slim swore. "You want I should ride straight up the gap? Yuh can't hide behind me, Pavi—you'll jest get shot!"

"Shore, I'll git shot *at,*" Pavi grinned. "Yuh don't need to worry about that. Yuh ride up the gap like hell!"

MUCH to Pavi's relief, Slim made no attempt to strike spurs to his horse and escape during the early part of the ride. The Lazy B puncher had conceived a daring bluff, which, if it worked, would cause the trail guard to lay down his two aces—the element of surprise, and the cover of the boulders; but the scheme depended upon having Slim ride up the slope first. However, the rustler had too great a respect for Pavi's accuracy with a six-gun to make any breaks. Nor had he any objection to entering the gap. He would be recognized; the danger would be to the stranger who followed. He would be able to bring the word that Pavi was alone.

They rode at an easy lope, some fifty yards apart, for nearly two hours. Pavi made only one preparation for the fight before him—he surreptitiously worked his own gun out of the folds of the slicker, and stuck it in the waist band of his trousers. He took care that Slim should not see him doing this—and then, when they had started up the wash, which led to the gap and there was only one road for Slim to follow, he checked his horse and began to fall behind. Little by little the space between the riders increased from fifty to seventy-five, to a hundred, to a hundred and twenty-five yards. Then, just before Slim turned into the open half-mile which led to the gap itself, Pavi suddenly whipped out his gun and fired.

"Run, will yuh!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, and striking spurs to his horse started after the fugitive at a gallop.

The bullet struck slightly behind and ten feet to the left of Slim—but the nester ascribed that to long range, rather than good shooting. Looking around he saw Pavi coming at the full gallop, his gun raised over his head for a second shot. Slim was unarmed and there was no way to run but forward.

He spurred his horse, leaned forward till his face was in his pony's mane to afford as small a mark as possible, and went thundering up the trail toward the gap with Pavi shouting and shooting a hundred and fifty yards behind.

At the sound of the first pistol shot a burly, shaggy-bearded puncher who had been dozing behind a boulder at the crest of the gap rolled to the carbine that lay ready across a flat-topped rock, and tried to slip another cartridge into the magazine—just to assure himself the weapon was fully loaded.

"Lessee—I'll let 'em git to that white rock b'fore I cut down on 'em," Shaggy muttered to himself, fixing upon a conspicuous white stone a hundred and fifty yards away. There was still some time to wait, and he peered from behind his natural rampart for a good look at the posse that dared to attack.

"Hell—that looks like Slim's pinto," Shaggy ejaculated, and raised his head above the boulder for a clearer scrutiny. "By thunder'n blazes, it *is!* Can't be two hosses has that star on the off-shoulder—hell, I see Slim's red head! Sho'! That bullet musta come close! That feller's goin' to git Slim!"

IT looked so. The chase was now halfway of the slope, and Pavi had begun to gain with every jump. He had crept up to within a hundred yards; instead of striking behind Slim his bullets were now kicking up dust many yards in front and singing within a foot of Slim's head as they went by. From above, Shaggy was able to line the shots by the spurt of dust and the position of the riders. He swore into his beard, and raised the sights on his carbine to the highest notch.

"Too fur for good shootin'—wisht I had me a .30-30 stead o' this old .44," he grumbled. "But I gotta stop him or he'll make meat o' Slim!"

The carbine boomed. At four hundred yards, and shooting downhill besides, Shaggy had scarcely expected to hit with an old .44-40 carbine, but none the less he was surprised when Pavi galloped on. The warning should have been enough to stop him. Shaggy swore, and drew a careful bead.

Pavi was three hundred yards from the crest, abreast of a scattered pile of boulders, when the carbine boomed again. The bullet passed directly over his head, so close that Pavi wondered that his hat was still on his head. Couldn't have missed him a foot—he musn't risk another shot.

"Got him!" shouted Shaggy in triumph. He leaped to his feet waving the carbine over his head. "How's that fer shootin'?" he yelled to Slim. "Knocked him clean out of the saddle—heels over head out. He lit on his feet an' pitched behind that rock, and I bet his gun went forty foot in the air! Bet he was four hundred yards away—mebbe five hundred!" Shaggy patted the stock of his carbine as Slim galloped up to him, and grinned evilly through his unkempt beard. "Who was the jasper?" he asked.

"Pavi Jones," Slim panted.

"Huh! That's what yuh get for bein' a baby," Shaggy sneered. "Naw, yuh couldn't git a man asleep by a fire—not you! An' in another jump he'd 'a' drilled yuh. Yuh should have got him—like I got my jasper."

Slim made a grimace of distaste. "Funny yuh don't see the body," he said to change the subject. "Yuh say he fell behind a boulder?"

"Yep. Right where yuh see his gun. That is funny," said Shaggy. "Thought I saw his foot stickin' out when he lit, too. Guess I'll sashay down and make shore."

Shaggy moved carelessly down the trail, holding his rifle at the port. Fifty yards down the trail he stopped suspiciously, but the sight of Pavi's gun in the

dirt reassured him, and he went on, though more warily. He was looking for a man dead or desperately wounded. His attention was centered on the boulder behind which Pavi had disappeared, and when Pavi, who had crept from one boulder to another fifty yards further up the slope, suddenly jumped to his feet Shaggy was taken by surprise. The rifle barrel jerked into line and was fired from the hip—but at close range the Colt is swifter than the Winchester. Though the reports blended the Colt spoke first, and Shaggy fell like a log, shot just above the heart.

"Don't move, Slim!" Pavi called warningly. He ran to Shaggy's body and snatched the carbine from his fingers, then hurried up the trail toward Slim. "Bluff worked," he said curtly. "Now you hit the breeze. Reckon yore rustler friends won't be so pleased when they heard what yuh done today. Hit for home, Slim—an' if you 'low you've anything to settle with me I'll see yuh later. Jest now I've business over the ridge."

"'Twas Shaggy killed yore pardner," Slim called, moving off at the best gait of which his tired pony was capable.

Pavi nodded to show that he had heard, but made no answer. He ran to his own pony, mounted, and spurred for the crest of the gap, for something in Slim's haste made him sure that the three other rustlers were close at hand, near enough to reinforce the guard on the back trail in case of attack. The two carbine shots had given warning, and considerable time had elapsed.

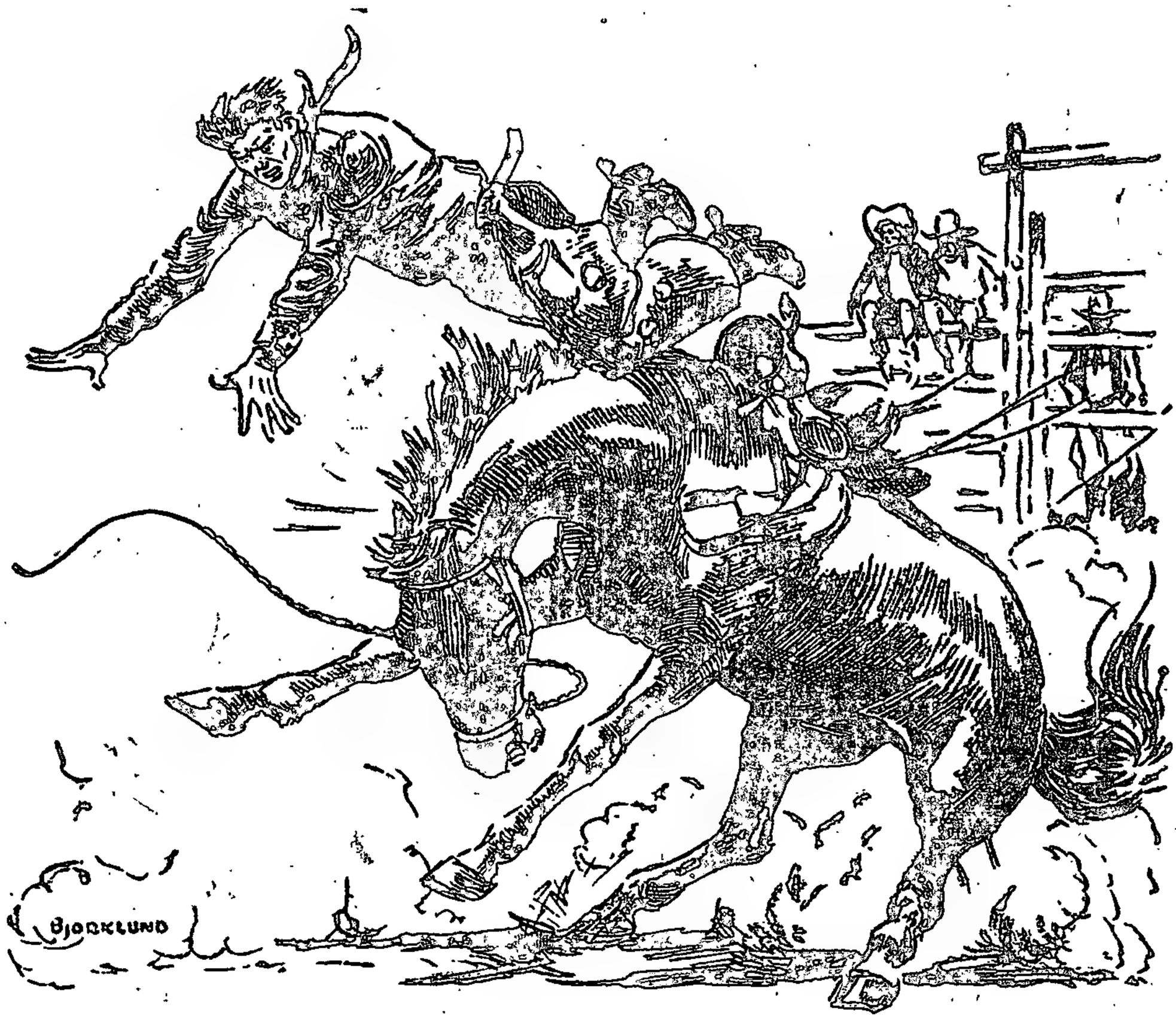
IT was well that he moved quickly. Two punchers with rifles across their saddles were galloping up the slope on the opposite side of the gap, and a third was just emerging from a side canyon that cut into the trail a quarter of a mile away. Pavi dismounted among the boulders and rested his rifle across a rock. He had but one course. These men also were morally guilty of the murder of his pardner; they saw him, and rode up shooting. It was now his life—or theirs. He waited, to allow the man in the rear to close in as much as possible, and then, at a hundred yards, swept the two leading rustlers out of their saddles with two carefully directed shots.

The third man fired once more, and instantly whirled his pony and quirted it madly down the trail with Pavi's bullets singing about his ears. But the range was far too great for accurate shooting.

"I'll know yuh, though," Pavi gritted as the hammer of his carbine clicked. "Yuh wear yore sombrero peaked, an' there ain't many waddies from the Southwest hereabout. Thought I was the only one!"

The fleeing rustler did look astonishingly like himself, Pavi reflected. The same peaked sombrero, about the same build, the same blue shirt and black kerchief. "Like me—or most any other puncher," Pavi grunted. "Well, I reckon I'll let yuh go, stranger. I got three for Bullhead, an' from the way yo're pourin' leather into that pony, I won't have no trouble gittin' back those cows."

Nor did he. Pavi found the stolen stock in a box canyon half a mile away, about a quarter with the brands altered, and one hogtied near the branding fire where the rustlers had dropped the iron when shots sounded from the gap. With the narrow canyons to help him Pavi was able to drive them single handed, and when the Lazy B punchers, warned at last by Muckstick, met him he was half way back to the range—with every head of the stolen stock, and three bodies lashed across the saddles of two led ponies to warn rustlers there was a puncher on the Lazy B more daring, and as ruthless as themselves.



Brand of the Owlboot

by JOHN CARLISLE

A fighting cowhand takes the brand of the longrider to clean a rustler hole of thieves and killers.

CHAPTER I

IN THE SADDLE

INSIDE the corral of the Tumbling E the black stallion stood with arched back and quivering legs, enraged because a saddle had been cinched upon him, and waiting only for the blanket to be snatched from his eyes to win another victory over a two-legged rider. On the fence above, a tall, hawknosed man about thirty years old was poised for a leap into the saddle; at advantageous points along the top rail sat old Eli Bannister, the owner of the Tumbling E, his daughter Claire, and his poker-faced foreman, Tonopah Barnes.

They were waiting to see Thunderbolt ridden; but at that moment neither they nor Ace Collins, the hawknosed man who had presented himnelf as a prospective buyer for the Tumbling E a day earlier and who was now about to do the riding, neither they nor Collins had eyes for the stallion. For from

the westward the tophand of the Tumbling E was loping back toward the ranch. Flash Hefferidge was still a half mile from the corral. Behind him the Montana hills in which he had been absent for three days hunting for rustlers seemed to bear the setting sun on their dark timbered crests. Twilight was falling, and a darkness like that which was settling over the sage brush crept also into the faces of the three spectators on the fence.

However thrilling the breaking of a horse may be, there is more excitement in breaking a high spirited man. Excitement there would be when Flash had ridden up to the corral; but to accuse and disgrace the peppery little tophand they had respected and loved, would not be sport. Moreover, they knew Flash's temper. And even if Flash had double-crossed them and joined the rustlers— and the evidence that he had done so seemed incontrovertible—they themselves were also caught at the present moment in the act of breaking a promise to him.

For it had been understood on the Tumbling E that no one—above all, no rival—was to be allowed to mount Thunderbolt before Flash had had his second chance to conquer the stallion. Bannister and Tonopah wondered what Flash was going to say when he was accused of covering the Tumbling E brand with a Diamond A; but not half so much as they dreaded what he might do when he saw Ace Collins on the stallion's back.

Yet the hawknosed Ace smiled—and controlled the grim twist of his lips before their expression could be observed. His schemes were maturing. For him the peppery little tophand could not have returned at a more advantageous moment. Flash was going to be red-hot mad. Ace expected that. He counted on it; he had persuaded the owner of the Tumbling E to allow him to break the stallion for no other purpose than to anger the tophand, but his most sanguine expectations had been that Flash would return *after* Thunderbolt had been ridden. To be able to witness the actual event was preferable by far.

For months the hawknosed Ace Collins had been weaving a noose for Flash's neck. The rustling which had depleted the Tumbling E range was a strand in it. So Ace's open courtship of Claire Bannister, despite the fact that she wore Flash's engagement ring on her finger and so was his crafty suggestion to her father that the brand books of the Cattleman's Association might provide a clue to the rustling. The ranch buyer knew exactly what evidence that inquiry would disclose. He had manufactured it in advance.

NOW the three strands were woven into a tightly twisted rope; and before the sun dropped behind the hills, the noose would be cast. Three days before, the peppery little tophand had ridden into the hills as Claire's fiancé; trusted by old man Bannister, and as the fast friend of the foreman. He would return to find himself suspected of robbing them, and Ace Collins, who, so far as Eli Bannister knew, was only the prospective ranch buyer he seemed to be, trusted to the fiery temper of the tophand to do the rest.

Ace Collins was playing a ruthless game; but the stakes were high. By ruining the quick-tempered little tophand he would secure for himself a ranch, a girl he loved as much as a man of his crafty selfishness could love anything; and most of all, personal safety and an honored place among his fellowmen. Ace had been a rustler. He still was; but his thefts from the Tumbling E were upon what he considered a very small scale. In Arizona Ace had rustled so much and so successfully, that he had amassed money enough to set him-

self up as a respectable ranchman. He had come north to Montana, not merely posing as a ranch buyer, which had been a favorite trick during his career as a rustler, but this time really in the market for land and stock. Soon he found he could not rid himself of the associates he had enlisted during his criminal days. They were broke, and the previous fall they had told Ace very pointedly that they weren't going to let him quit the game. Not at all. The Tumbling E, they pointed out, was at the edge of the hills and near the state line. There was plenty of timber and rough country to hide stolen cattle. All they needed to do was to establish another ranch in the next state, register a brand which would cover the Tumbling E, and steal old Bannister blind.

Ace had to admit that this was true. He had been wedged into a corner of the Cattleman's Saloon in Moose City; and Bull Mendoza had had his hand too close to a gun for Ace to say anything else.

"I'll register the brand," he nodded. "Diamond A ought to do it nice. See here." He sketched the brands in spilled liquor on the table top.

"Likewise, I'll keep visitin', either makin' out to buy a ranch or for breaking horses, as usual, an' tip yuh off when to raid. Find yourselves a nester that knows the country an'll show yuh the trails. That ought to satisfy yuh."

Bull Mendoza growled that it did. Blonde, weak chinned Oregon nodded. They had already spotted a crooked nester calling himself Mal Stone. The three of them would start work *pronto*. Thus it came about that since Fall the Tumbling E had lost stock. All Flash's riding was to no purpose. Ace and his men were all skilful, and the little tophand never had a chance to find them at work.

But though Ace might have seemed to agree with his men, he had not done so. He was sick of the risk, and at the fall roundup dance he had met tall, brown eyed, brown haired Claire Bannister, with her quiet, wise smile and the gleam of humor that came and went deep in her eyes. Claire was wearing Flash's ring on her finger, but the rustler didn't care for that. He wanted her, he wanted her father's ranch, and he wanted to get rid of his gang.

To the two first desires Flash Hefferidge barred his path, but the hawk-nosed ranch buyer didn't figure that a straightforward, impulsive, twenty-three year old tophand would be much of an obstacle. At once he began weaving the noose which would make Flash leave the Tumbling E in disgrace, and which would establish Ace himself in the good opinion of Claire and her father. Ace intended to steal the ranch blind and then be the man to recover every one of the lost cows. Somewhere in the proceedings he would break up his rustler outfit very thoroughly indeed.

ACE was clever. For four months his plans matured without a hitch, the crisis would come now, as soon as Flash dismounted at the corral, but Ace had smiled because of complete confidence. To his crafty mind the beauty and strength of the whole scheme was that one act accomplished all three purposes. Not a difficult or a dangerous act—simply the registration of a brand, and the forging of two names as its owners.

Out on the plain Flash suddenly spurred his pony from a lope into a gallop. The peppery tophand had seen what was taking place in the corral. Slow moving old Bannister reached behind and fingered the letter from the Cattleman's Association that rested in his hip pocket. Beside him Claire stared at the dust, turning the ring round and round her finger. Poker-face Tonopah

Barnes lowered his lean six feet to the ground and walked gloomily toward the onrushing rider, and because none of the three were noticing him, Ace Collins smiled again—more broadly this time.

Flash was red hot mad—because his rival was riding Thunderbolt where Claire could watch. Ace hoped the tophand would pick a fight. A quarrel would tighten every strand in the carefully woven noose.

The peppery tophand jerked his pony to a standstill barely in time to avoid riding the foreman down. The dust thrown up by the sliding hoofs swirled in the tall foreman's face.

"Easy, boy! Keep your shirt on, now, till I talk to yuh!" the foreman sung out; but Flash vaulted from the saddle while the pony was still sliding and dodged under the arm of the older man held out to restrain him.

"I won't neither! I'll bust his head for him before Thunderbolt gets a chance," he gritted, and started on a run for the corral. Ace Collins swung his legs to the outer side of the bars and waited, with the self-satisfied sneer on his handsome face now apparent. His spurred boots, almost on a level with the tophand's chin, brought Flash to a halt.

"Git down," the peppery little cowboy ordered. "If I ain't let to ride Thunderbolt, there ain't no stranger go-in' to, just because he thinks a lot of hisself an' lets on to be a ranch buyer!"

Flash's eyes were a vivid, snapping blue, and on each cheek bone, between eye and ear, was a small scarlet patch like the print of a bloody thumb. He did not stand more than five feet seven in high heel boots, and his wiry, rather slender figure, wouldn't have tipped scales set at a hundred and thirty. The spectacle of a little man about to pull Ace Collins' six feet of bone and muscle off the fence, with the intention of dusting up the ground with him, ought to have been comic. It wasn't. Flash was too angry to be ridiculous.

"You had your chance," Ace retorted deliberately. He was as cold as Flash was hot. A sarcastic, self-satisfied smile kept playing around his mouth. Although what he said sounded to the others as though he were talking about the stallion, his hat brim did not hide his face from Flash, and the curl of his lips gave his words another meaning.

"Your cinch didn't leave any brand," he went on. "If I'd been here then it would have been me that cinched up" It had been at the fall roundup dance that Claire Bannister first wore Flash's ring. That same night Ace had met her for the first time, and to the tophand the double meaning in the statement was obviously an insult. "Anyways, I'm going to break him," Ace continued. A cold gleam came into his dark eyes. "Though I'd as lief shut yore mouth for yuh first," he ended, and moved to jump off the fence.

But that move was as far as he was allowed to get. Old Tonopah Barnes shouldered between them.

"Back up. This here is the boss's orders," he told Flash. "We been hear-in' things about you, feller, that will take a power of explainin'. Don't you add to your own troubles none, they's things more important than ridn' a hawss."

"After what he said," gritted the tophand, "*nothin'* ain't more important."

Flash would have continued, but the owner of the Tumbling E backed up his foreman. "You, Ace—go on an' ride!" Bannister called. The hawknosed ranch buyer shrugged and swung his legs inside the fence. For an instant he hesitated, then dropped into the saddle, while the horse wrangler holding Thunderbolt jerked away the blanket and scrambled up the fence to be out of the way.

THUNDERBOLT went straight up into the air till he tottered on hind feet alone. It looked as though Ace would be forced to leap from the saddle almost before he touched it, but he snatched off hin Stetson and struck the stallion three times across the laid-back ears. His spurs raked each shoulder alternately, till the stallion, snorting, brought its forefeet down with a pile-driver thud.

"Good—oh, Ace, good!" shouted Claire, and beside her, slow spoken old Bannister shifted his quid.

"Ain't buckin' yet," he grunted.

Thunderbolt's head went between his knees. He stood stock still, his back arched and his eyes rolling, long enough for Ace to wave his hat to Claire and rake once more with his spurs. Then with a shrill scream of anger the stallion sunfished right and left, right and left. All four hoofs were clear of the ground at every leap. He twisted catlike in midair, turning a quarter circle with every jump—racking the rider cruelly, but never breaking the grip of Ace's knees.

The stallion must have known he was being superbly ridden. At the fence he reared, and recrossed the corral in six prodigious plunges, ending on the opposite side by a terrific jump in which he swapped ends. He faced the bars when he went into the air—his tail swished against them when he lighted, and for the first time light showed between Ace and the saddle. He was off balance, but the grip of his long legs saved him, and though Thunderbolt began to pitch, in that crucial half dozen seconds the stallion's plunges were less violent. The hawk-nosed man recovered his seat without pulling leather or locking spurs, but the strain had told. Under its tan Ace's dark face was pale. He was raking Thunderbolt no longer.

"Buckin' now," grunted Bannister. "One minute an 'ten seconds—"

"Look out!" shrilled Claire. The stallion had twisted on his hind legs, squealing, and suddenly hurled himself for the corral fence to dash his rider against it. No bucking now. Unable to shake Ace from his back Thunderbolt meant to kill him. Tigerishly the stallion leaped across the corral, turning sidewise to the fence only at the last instant. He struck the embedded logs with an impact that made them quiver and hurled the stallion himself to the earth.

Ace also was on the ground. At the start of that rush he had vaulted from the saddle, stumbling and falling headlong in the dust, but with a quickness unexpected in so big a man, he was on his feet and over the fence before Thunderbolt got on his legs.

Safe astride the top rail Ace turned and shook his fist at the stallion.

"Tricked yuh, yuh murderin' outlaw!" he shouted. His hawknose face was black with anger; his hand flashed toward his hip for the gun he had removed before starting his ride. Yet the gesture passed unnoticed. Claire's cry of triumph, Bannister's explosive "Ha!" of approval, drove the rage from the ranch buyer's face. He grinned.

"Rode him, even if he is an outlaw," he bragged—speaking to Bannister, but with his dark eyes on the girl.

"Rode hell! Thunderbolt bested yuh!" snapped Flash. The bowlegged little tophand was whiter than before. The mark on his cheek burned a more brilliant scarlet, for the cry of praise Claire had given his rival had cut him to the quick. "Call a hawss an outlaw just because it tries to jam yore leg? Most any bronc will do that," he taunted. "Why didn't yuh wait an' hop on when he rose, instead of squirreling over the fence? There ain't *no* rider's brand on *that* horse. Put on yours—if yo're man enough!"

Ace's eyes narrowed calculatingly.

The surge of the maddened stallion and the memory of the corral fence seeming to rush upon him, were still vivid in his mind. Thunderbolt had already thrown Flash once—the stallion was now in a vicious mood.

"Maybe yuh think you could do better," he sneered. "Go slap yore hull on him an' show us a ride."

"I don't need to wait for my saddle. 'S enough to shorten the stirrups on yours," Flash retorted. In the corral Thunderbolt had already been roped. The blanket was over the stallion's head, and the horse wrangler was kneeling to unfasten the cinch. Flash glanced at Claire. He had last seen her with her head thrown back, her hair flying, and her brown eyes shining with excitement as she cheered Ace on. But now the girl's eyes were grave. She was twisting his ring on her finger, and beside her old Eli Bannister was frowning and clearing his throat.

"Hold up, Flash," he muttered.

"Don't I git to ride?" snapped the peppery little puncher in fury.

THE ranchman shrugged. Old Bannister was a huge man, nearing sixty, and beginning to put on weight. He wore a black Stetson with a seven inch brim, the biggest hat in the country, and in the gathering twilight it shaded his face till Flash could see nothing save a drooping grayish white mustache that moved gently with the slow, ruminative champing of Bannister's jaws.

"There's somethin' to settle fust," the owner of the Tumbling E continued tonelessly. "About this rustlin'—yuh ain't found no sign in the last three days?"

"No."

"I was hopin' yuh might, Flash. Yeah, I was hopin' yuh might," responded the ranchman in answer to that curt, defiant negative. "Mebbe yuh know somethin' about the Diamond A brand? Big diamond, with the point up. Small A in the lower half, with the foot of the letter resting on the lower sides to the diamond—to be branded on the right hip?"

"No. Never saw one," snapped the bowlegged little cowboy.

"Cattlemen's Association wrote me about it because it's a new brand—registered late last fall from a ranch back inside the mountains," Bannister persisted grmily, "an' it would cover a Tumblin' E right slick. It was registered by—by—"

The name seemed to stick in Bannister's throat, and before he could utter it Flash turned on his heel.

"Yuh can tell me after I break Thunderbolt. This here is goin' to be a *finish* ride," he snapped, and was over the fence before the slow speaking old ranchman could protest.

CHAPTER II

Jarred Loose

"FOR Gawd's sake, feller, keep yo're head!" muttered Tonopah. The foreman wanted to warn his tophand, but he was given no chance to say what he meant. Flash motioned him out of the way, and Tonopah snatched away the blanket and ran. If Thunderbolt didn't cripple Flash—well, the bow-legged little hellion was going to wish he was *killed,* that was all!

Thunderbolt rose, snorting because again a man was on his back, a hat slamming him about the head, and spurs raking his shoulders. The stallion was a big bodied horse, weighing close to twelve hundred pounds, and jet black save for the zigzag white blaze on his forehead which had suggested his name. The clean legs, the depth of chest, and the thickness of the stallion's barrel

promised unusual endurance and speed, but his size made him a far more difficult horse to ride than the usual nine hundred pound bronco. Only a tall man had legs long enough to get a good grip around Thunderbolt's body.

Therefore, Flash began his ride under a handicap—which increased because the efforts of the stallion to dislodge him, if less spectacular than those Ace had encountered, were far more punishing, Instead of rearing and sunfishing, Thunderbolt got his head down between his knees and began to pitch. Ace's seat and agility had been tested, not his nerve. Thunderbolt's second attack was upon Flash's stamina and gameness.

Rising upon his hind legs, the stallion would come down on stiffened fore feet. Up would go the hind quarters, to fall with the same tearing, wrenching jar. The first pitch snapped Flash's hat from his head. Instantly Thunderbolt leaped upon it, cutting the felt to ribbons with his hoofs; before he was done, blood was flowing from the bow-legged little tophand's nose. With every pitch, the shock to him was as though he had been picked up two feet in the air and dropped upon the saddle; every time those pile-driver legs of Thunderbolt's thudded on the ground the wrench given to the muscles of the little cowboy's abdomen felt like the thrust of a dull knife driven into his vitals.

Jar—jar—jar—jar. Four pitches in the same spot; then a racking twist as Thunderbolt leaped forward. Jar—jar—jar—jar. Four pitches more, and another forward leap. No rest, no let up in that steady pounding.

A black mist, shot with red fire whenever those hoofs hit the ground, began to dance before Flash's eyes. He raked the sweating black hide with his spurs and beat with hand and quirt to force Thunderbolt to move, to buck, to fall backward or even to hurl himself at the fence—anything to get one second's relief from that steady jar—jar—jar—jar. Anything would have been better than this inhuman test of brute strength in which man and horse must undergo equal punishment.

"Three minutes an' four seconds! Git off, Flash, if yuh can!" shouted old Bannister. Flash heard the ranchman faintly. He was waiting for a cry from Claire, but none came—the girl was sitting rigid on the fence, her underlip caught between her teeth. This was a business too grim for cheering. While Flash fought to keep from fainting, she was visualizing the end. Every thump of Thunderbolt's hoofs on the hard ground might mean a shock that would cripple Flash by an internal injury. If he should be thrown or attempt to dismount the maddened stallion was ready to leap upon him.

The bow-legged little cowboy had no breath for speech. He shook his head, waved his hand feebly in answer to the ranchman. He was about done, but so, he figured, must Thunderbolt be. He was going to stick till he dropped—couldn't be long now— The stallion was tiring.

Flash might have conquered had not the saddle began to slip. On the fence the onlookers knew it by the spasm, not born of pain, that appeared on the cowboy's face. It was a jump or two before the saddle twisted enough to be noticeable, but then Bannister swore under his breath and pulled his six-gun.

"Jump Flash—jump or I'll have to shoot!" he roared—too slow of wit to see what Tonopah had already understood.

"CAN'T yuh see the hoss will git him if he jumps?" snarled the foreman, and shook out his rope. The saddle was slipping sidewise as he rose to make his cast. The rope snaked in a wide circle beneath Thunderbolt's upraised fore-

feet, and was jerked tight when they struck the ground. The horse went down, and Flash, falling rather than jumping from the saddle, tumbled in a heap barely clear of the thrashing rear hoofs. He was able to get to his feet, but that was all. He could scarcely stand or walk; for him to have climbed the fence would have been impossible.

Three of the onlookers jumped as one to his assistance. Claire caught Flash by the shoulder and pulled him backward. She had him out of danger before her slower moving father arrived to help. Between them they half led, half carried the little cowboy out of the gate, while Tonopah threw himself upon the prostrate stallion. It was fast, quick work on the part of all, and by contrast the immobility of the hawknosed rancher became an indifference that amounted to downright deliberate insult.

Leisurely Ace swung to the ground and sauntered over to his rival.

"Thunderbolt ain't rode yet, that I see," he taunted. "This the way yuh make all your *finish* rides?"

The little tophand was sitting on the ground with his head between his knees. Though the effort to rise twisted his face with pain he shook off Claire's hand and came to his feet, his fists clenched.

"Pleases yuh, huh?" he gritted.

"Don't worry me none to see yuh jarred loose," Ace retorted. "Same as yuh did when yuh registered that Diamond A brand an' started rustlin' from your own boss!"

For an instant the bow-legged little tophand only stared.

"Huh?" he ejaculated under his breath, as though he didn't understand or couldn't believe his ears. Then, as understanding did arrive, the crimson danger signal flashed into his cheeks, and from a fist, his right hand became a talon that clawed his gun out of the leather before Claire or Tonopah could intervene, or Ace make a move in self-defense.

Murder was in the tophand's eyes. Almost he shot. Yet, half raised, the upward swing of the Colt was arrested, so that it pointed rigidly at Ace's knee.

"I forgot yuh hadn't no gun," Flash panted, for his enemy had removed the heavy Colt before mounting the stallion to save himself from a bruised leg. "Reckon—yuh wouldn't have said that —if yuh had been heeled. Anyhow"—the Colt rose into line with the big man's stomach and Flash's eyes became a lighter, steelier blue—*"Yuh kin say yuh lied, right now!"*

The hawknosed man shrugged. " 'Taint me that's sayin' it," he replied coldly.

From left and right Bannister and old Tonopah closed in upon the furious tophand. The foreman seized Flash's wrist and dragged the gun down till its muzzle was aimed at the earth, while the ranchman stepped between the two so that he shielded Ace with his own body.

"It's me that says so, Flash," he accused. "Leastwise—" the ranchman's heavy mustache worked nervously and he groped slowly for words—"it was the Cattleman's Association, when I asked them. Hell, boy!" the old man went on huskily, "I'd most rather yuh stole every cow I had than to find out yuh *did* steal them. But last fall, just before we began to lose our stock, the Diamond A was registered by F. Hefferidge and a feller named B. Mendoza."

"Don't give a damn about the Association! I never done it!" Flash raged. "If you think so yuh lie—"

THE ranchman's lips hardened. "Yuh can't git out of it that way, boy," he responded. "It ain't only the Asso-

ciation's say-so. Yuh been out ridin' a heap, an' we mostly loses cows while yuh been gone in the hills, especially when yuh took Tonopah or the horse wrangler with yuh. Your name ain't common; nor one a rustler would hit on by accident. Why yuh didn't sign yo'reself John Smith I dunno."

"Because I never signed nothin'!" Flash shouted. He twisted to face the foreman. "Tonopah ole timer," he appealed, "yuh don't believe no such nonsense, do yuh? Hell, I been ridin' with yuh for years. Yuh don't believe I'd steal from my own boss an'—an' my own girl?"

"I ain't sure," the foreman began slowly. "Don't seem so, scarcely, but them rustlers always knew where we was and where we weren't. You've been sore all the time since last fall, and if you took a notion—"

"Yuh do believe it, an' yuh can go to hell!" the tophand shouted. He wrenched his gun from the older man and jammed it into the holster. His face was pasty white with fury. The spots on his cheeks burned crimson, and his breath came in quick gasps. "I tell yuh I don't know nothin' about no such brand an' yuh kin believe what yuh please, yuh bunch of double-crossin' coyotes.

"How about you, Claire?" the tophand snarled, whirling to face the girl. "Reckon you're jumpin' at the chance to call me thief, just because I ain't got no ranch of my own, nor ain't likely to get one! You know why I've been sore. I ain't made no secret of it!" Flash glared at the hawknosed ranch buyer. "Come on—do yuh believe in me or not?" he continued roughly.

"You've no call to speak to me like that!" the girl flared. She had risen, and she met the tophand's brutal and unwarranted accusation, born of jealousy and over-mastering rage, with an upflung chin and eyes that flashed as angrily as those of the bow-legged little tophand himself. "I don't want to believe nothing wrong about yuh, Flash —" she was continuing.

"Do you or don't yuh?" he interrupted.

The harsh demand made the girl draw herself to her full height. Taller than Flash, deep breasted, her brown eyes flashing, she confronted him fearlessly. "You shan't talk like that—" she retorted.

"You've got no right to wear my ring if you think I'm a thief," said the tophand furiously.

The girl drew a long breath. For a moment she looked at the little man to make sure that he meant what he said, but the blue eyes bored into her own, and the scarlet signal of ungovernable fury flamed in the tophand's cheeks.

"Yuh can pack it away if yuh want it," said Claire. She drew the ring from her finger and started to hand it to Flash, but at the moment he reached for it, almost snatching at her hand in his anger, she drew back.

"No, I ain't sure. And I ain't goin' to be bullied," she said. " I ain't goin' to wear it till I am sure, but I ain't goin' to give it back, neither, till yuh ask for it when you're yourself. You're loco."

"You're welcome to the hundred it cost," snapped the tophand furiously.

THE girl's eyes blazed. She turned on her heel and started toward the ranch house, and no retort could have been as disdainful as the stiff erectness of her back. Even in the midst of Flash's fury her attitude sobered him momentarily.

"I ain't goin' to tell yuh nothin'. Yuh kin think what yuh please an' be damned," he went on, but his voice was dogged rather than furious. "But if the Cattleman's Association told yuh where that Diamond A ranch was we'll ride

there an' see what we find. Will that be proof enough for yuh?"

"Maybe," insinuated Collins.

Flash glared. "You keep your mouth shut," he said. "We got somethin' yet to settle over breakin' that—stallion."

The hawknosed man scowled, and if he had made the answer that was on his lips the quarrel between the two might have been settled then and there, but Bannister intervened.

"It's too dark to start inside now," he objected.

The sun had sunk below the hills, and deep twilight, which would be black darkness in another fifteen minutes, lay over the plains. Nevertheless, the tophand shook his head impatiently.

"Right now," he insisted. "I ain't sleeping under the roof of no man that calls me a thief. I'm going to make yuh take that back, an' that'll be the last Montana'll see of me. I'm sick of yuh all!"

"He's right. We ought to go, Eli," said old Tonopah. Ace protested, but the foreman's support got Flash his way. Bannister gave a grunt and a nod. He led the way toward the ponies, and the other three walked behind him in a compact group. Ace was smiling to himself, and now and again Flash glared at him. The bad blood between the two was so undisguised that on the way to the corral the foreman walked between them.

The precaution did not escape the peppery little tophand's notice, but he only grunted and swung himself into the saddle of the pony he had ridden that day.

"It's mine. So I won't have to ride back with yuh," he explained bitterly, and sat lighting cigarettes and throwing them away impatiently while the ranch buyer transferred his saddle to his roan and Bannister and Tonopah cinched up a black and a sorrel respectively.

"Yuh can be pilot—because I don't know where this Diamond A hangout is," the tophand snapped at Bannister when all were ready.

The ranchman took the lead without comment. For a mile they rode in silence and in darkness broken only by the fitful glow of Flash's cigarette, and the occasional flare of a match when the tophand lit a new smoke. As they reached the crest of a long, gentle rise in the prairie, however, Bannister drew rein. He was tugging thoughtfully at his mustache when the rest halted beside him.

"Damned if I know just where I *am* going," he ruminated. "Come to think of it, the location of that ranch was stated pretty vague. The letter said, 'on the headwaters of Sioux Creek'—which is fifty miles off to the northwest. But which fork of Sioux Creek? What do yuh think, Tonopah? If it's on the right fork, we ought to go inside through Brockman's Gap, but if it's the left Snake Canyon would be shorter. It's all roughs and timber between them forks, with no trail across I know of, an' we don't want to leave the Tumblin' E too long, with no one about but the girl an' the hoss wrangler."

"We can follow the creek from one fork to the other, can't we? I'm goin' to *find* that ranch," declared Flash impatiently, and snapping away his cigarette, fished out Durham and papers to build a new one.

"We ain't takin' no tips from yuh," growled Ace. "Brockman's Gap is shorter—an' a better road for cattle ain't it?" he insinuated, addressing the ranchman.

"Reckon 'tis," Bannister deliberated, but still he made no move. With a grunt of disgust at such vacillation, Ace twisted up a cigarette himself. The spurt of his match followed the flare of that struck by the tophand, and perhaps because of impatience, the big hawknosed man failed to get a light. He

struck a second almost instantly, and after one long puff tossed the cigarette away.

"Brockman's ain't it?" he suggested again.

THE ranchman nodded and started his horse forward. Ace reached again for Durham and papers, but although he rolled the smoke expertly with one hand, the breeze caused by the motion of his pony seemed to bother him. To get the tobacco going took three matches.

"Are you nervous, or just clumsy?" sneered Flash. "Here's the way a regular waddie does that!" The tophand demonstrated, holding the flame behind his cupped palm while he rode for several rods—long enough to light a dozen cigarettes.

Ace Collins scowled. Imperceptibly he slackened the pace of his pony until he was riding shoulder to shoulder with the peppery little tophand, and as the big man lagged behind Flash also moderated the gait of his mount, until a gap of twenty-five yards opened between them and the leaders.

"Yuh act like yuh got something on your mind. Well—spill it," Flash rasped.

"I aim to," said the big man loudly. "Yuh've smoked a-plenty, feller. Quit it!"

"Huh?" said the tophand sharply.

In front of them Tonopah twisted in the saddle. Ace's peremptory tone had been loud enough to reach his ears clearly, and at Flash's defiant exclamation the old foreman checked his pony. He waited for the two to catch up to him—which neither seemed disposed to do. They reined their ponies to a walk, so that their distance from Tonopah remained the same.

"I know you ain't doin' this rustlin' alone, an' I ain't goin' to have you signal your friends in the hills, yuh coyote," sneered Ace in an undertone, and added loudly, "I said, 'Quit it!' Think we want the whole range to know where we're heading?"

"You're a liar!" Flash shouted furiously.

Ace's pony swerved against the tophand's. "You're a damn tricky thief," snarled the hawknosed man under his breath.

"You're heeled now—shuck it!" Flash roared. He paused, peering into the darkness only long enough to make sure that Ace understood his challenge and was reaching for his gun; then Flash's own hand darted toward his Colt.

Look and movement were lightning-like and all but simultaneous. The tophand's fingers were hooked around the butt of his Colt when his eyes informed him how he had been tricked. Ace had understood, but he had not drawn—had not needed to. He had been riding with his Colt in his hand, hidden behind his leg. As Flash reached toward his holster Ace swung the barrel of his weapon across the saddle. He was waiting for the tophand's Colt to be out of the leather before pulling the trigger.

Tonopah had heard the quarrel. Had heard Flash insult Ace, and challenge him. If the tophand were shot, it would have seemed to be because he had picked on a man faster than he on the draw. Flash was beaten; but in that infinitestimal part of a second while his gun still hung in the leather the tophand swung his left fist into Ace's face, and lunged sidewise out of the saddle against him.

Ace's gun exploded, but the blow and the impact of the tophand's body against his own spoiled his aim. The bullet raked across the shoulder of Flash's mount, and with a scream of pain the pony bucked and galloped aside. For an instant the tophand clung around Ace's neck, while the roan car-

ried them both. Then his weight pulled the ranch buyer from the saddle. Again the Colt exploded, aimlessly; then the two thumped on the ground, the bigger man underneath.

MOMENTARILY, the shock dazed Ace. Flash saw stars himself, but he pulled his gun clear. He could not shoot. They were body to body, and Collins was beginning to struggle; but Flash raised the gun and struck two vicious blows with the barrel. Twice the tophand felt the jar of steel on bone. Both blows landed on Ace's head. The big man groaned and went limp, and Flash pulled clear of his clutches and rolled onto his feet just as Tonopah leaped from the saddle beside the struggling pair.

"You, Flash?" whispered the foreman. He recognized the tophand by his side. "Yuh've done it now, damn yuh! There's Ace's roan! Take it an' git! I aint' goin' to hang my own pardner, no matter how bad he needs it. Git!"

"But he said—" Flash panted. Then he stared hard at Ace Collins lying there as limp as though he were dead.

"He ain't said no more than we all think!" continued the foreman. "I heard yuh tellin' him to draw!" whispered the foreman grimly. "Git, yuh damn murderin' young fool! Here comes Bannister—an' yuh might thank Gawd I'm lettin' yuh go, instead of pluggin' yuh like I ought!"

Flash's mind worked like lightning. Bannister was coming indeed. His figure loomed through the darkness, coming at a gallop, as Flash, groping backward, found the reins of Ace's roan in his fingers.

"Get the young hellion, Tonopah—don't let him get away!" roared Bannister.

Flash vaulted into the saddle. At the jab of his spurs the roan leaped aside into the night and was gone, while behind Tonopah dragged out his gun and fired twice. Both bullets whined high above the tophand's head. He knew the old foreman was shooting high deliberately, but the *zup* of the speeding lead, the boom of Bannister's Colt and the whine of a bullet that was wide, indeed, but aimed to kill, lent wings to his flight.

Throwing himself flat on the roan's back, Flash gave the horse its head. Whether Ace was dead or not he didn't know. He hoped so, but he wasn't sure. What was going to happen next Flash didn't know or care. He was still red hot mad. The Tumbling E had thrown him out. He hated the ranch and every one on it. Yes—even Claire.

CHAPTER III

DAZE

THE bow-legged little tophand rode for the hills because behind, where the ranches were situated, there was no longer any place for him. He had no fixed purpose or destination—nothing but an angry, obstinate curiosity regarding this Diamond A outfit. He headed for Snake Canyon chiefly because there were only two passes into the hills and because the Tumbling E outfit had chosen Brockman's Gap, rather than with any clear idea of seeking out the ranch which the Cattleman's Association declared was owned by "F. Hefferidge and B. Mendoza."

He rode for more than an hour. The hills, which at first loomed ahead like a black rampart, drew nearer and nearer till their shadow closed above his head, and the gait of his roan slowed to a walk as the trail climbed the steep, stony ascent of Snake Canyon. The pathway was little more than a ten-foot gap cut in red sandstone by the freshets

of a hundred thousand springs. For a quarter mile the walls were nearly vertical; near the top of the rise they were quite perpendicular, for here a dike of harder rock narrowed the canyon till two horsemen would have scarcely been able to ride abreast. Beyond this point the sandstone was softer. The walls opened out, and the trail twisted sharply to the right.

Flash was in the gut of the pass when the roan whinnied. The sound confined by the steep walls was loud enough to startle the tophand. He sat up erect in the saddle, and reining the pony to a halt, listened intently. Some one must be nearby, but he could hear nothing —neither the sound of a horse nor the accidental click of hoof upon stone, made by a pony whose nostrils were gripped shut lest it answer the roan's whinny.

"Don't make no difference nohow," Flash muttered. "Strangers can't be no more onery to me than my friends."

Down the canyon a whisper echoed as though it were an answer.

"Can't yuh see it's a roan? Shore it's him! Come on!" growled a bass voice. Hoofs clicked on stone, and out of the darkness three men materialized, blocking the tophand's path upward.

"Howdy, strangers!" said Flash promptly.

Quick as a cat springs all three men moved. The muzzle of a carbine touched the tophand's chest. The dim starlight in the canyon bottom gleamed on the blued steel of a Colt in the hands of the second man; the third slipped to the ground and seized Flash's pony by the bit.

"Stranger is right!" growled the biggest man—he who held the Winchester against Flash's breast. "Where's Ace Collins, an' what the devil are you doin' on his roan?"

"Right now I'm huntin' for the Diamond A," said Flash softly. "Big Diamond, small A in the bottom half. Branded on the right hip, same as the Tumblin' E."

Perfect silence. Then the big man swore under his breath. To Flash it sounded like, "The hell yuh say!" but when the big man answered it was with one word.

"Why?"

"Because I own it," Flash replied gently. "Me an' a hombre called B. Mendoza own it. The boss got a letter from the Cattleman's Association sayin' so, an' I had to leave in such a hell of a hurry I took Ace's roan. He didn't need it. A feller had just bent a six-gun across his head."

"The—hell—you—say!" swore the big man, aloud this time. "What feller?" he added, like a crack of a whip.

"ME," said the little tophand. "To save yuh time, I'm Flash Hefferidge, that used to ride for the Tumblin' E before they called me a rustler, an' I broke Ace's head because he named me thief once too often. Now that yuh know, what of it?"

"You an' B. Mendoza, eh?" said the big man. "Now, that's right curious. Damn curious!" he added with unexpected violence. "Yuh, see, I call myself Mendoza. Go by the name of Bull. You an' me is pardners, stranger, so I calls it curious—*damn* curious—we've never met. Whereabouts is this ranch we own? I never saw any such iron!"

"Headwaters of Sioux Creek," said Flash.

Bull Mendoza grunted. He sounded relieved.

"That's a long ways off," was his comment. "Strike a light, Mal. We ain't in so much of a hurry as we thought we was, an' I'd admire to see my pardner's face!"

The man holding the tophand's horse obeyed. "It's Flash Hefferidge, of the Tumblin' E, all right," he declared.

The bow-legged little tophand had also used his eyes during that second of light. Mal he recognized. Mal Stone was the full name the man holding the horse gave himself—a nester with a small place near the edge of the timber close to Brockman's Gap. Stone was a very tall man, something over six feet four, and thin as a lath. His Adam's apple was prominent and bobbed up and down when he talked like the slide of a trombone. He wasn't regarded very highly by the ranchmen of the county. Like most nesters he was suspected of doing a little rustling when he got the opportunity, but no one had been able to prove it. Mal Stone came and went in town as he chose. A hang dog air, thick reddish eyebrows, and beady reddish brown eyes made him look like a thief, but this was the first time the peppery little tophand had ever discovered the nester in a suspicious looking place, or with companions who were incriminating.

For the big man and his companion were strangers. The instant they stopped him Flash had decided he had met the rustlers at last, and with one of his characteristically rash impulses, had made up his mind to join them. The scowl the light of the match revealed on the big man's face, however, made Flash doubt that his idea was going to pan out.

Bull was big as a barn door. Broad shouldered, deep chested, of less than average height, he resembled a gorilla hunched in the saddle, and the similarity was increased by a four day stubble of black whiskers which covered his face to the eyes.

"You light down, Oregon. Change hosses with the stranger," he growled. "If he's givin' the real facts about his name, mebbe he's tellin' the truth about *mine*—which make me curiouser than ever. G'wan, Oregon! Yo're ridin' the roan tonight."

"Ain't yuh goin' back, Bull? I can't take no chances bein' seen—" Mal Stone protested as the third man swung from the saddle. The tophand remained mounted. He knew Oregon's type, and dismissed him as a relatively unimportant factor in this game. Oregon was an undernourished, pop-eyed, slack-jawed kid; the weak, rather stupid sort who run with crooks once they are thrown in with them, who will take orders from any one, and end up as a hanger-on at some ranch if they are honest, and dangling from a cottonwood limb if they are not. Bull and Stone, however, were shrewd, determined men, and the tophand didn't wonder much that they had been able to steal from the Tumbling E for four months at least without getting caught at it.

"LOOK here!" said Flash abruptly. "Reckon I have some say who rides my pony. I ain't a kid nor a tenderfoot, an' when I get a run off a ranch I aim to get square. I know you all ain't ridin' this time of night for the scenery—that's why I showed yuh all the cards face up. If you're Bull Mendoza, you an' me is bein' blamed for this rustlin', an' I aim to get some of the cows! Reckon I know the lay of the land, an' where the stock is!"

"Not no better'n we do. In the pack yuh showed, you ain't more than a two spot," Bull grunted. A shrug of his big shoulders dismissed Flash, and he went on addressing the nester.

"You ain't goin' to be seen, Mal," he continued. "Sashay to town. Hang around until—you know. An' feller, use your head. The boss is smart, and yuh remember he didn't want to start this deal. I've never been pardners in a ranch before, an' don't like the idee none whatever."

"But you're going on?" demanded the nester somewhat doubtfully.

"Didn't I get the high sign? I'm

goin' on," growled the big rustler. "But if there's anything phoney, I'm goin' with a man I kin trust *an' a roan pony they'll be nowise expectin'!*"

"Not unless I ride it!" snapped Flash recklessly.

Bull swung his leg over the horn and eased his squat bulk to the ground. He did not hurry, nor reply. Flash was thinking he had made his bluff good when a hand caught him by the knee and the belt of his chaps, half lifted half jerked him from the saddle—then swung him through the air and dropped him onto the stony ground.

Flash saw more stars than any astronomer ever knew. He was taken utterly by surprise, and the strength of the rustler amazed him. The tophand was flying through the air before he realized he was attacked, and though he tried to scramble to his feet and pit quickness against brute force, Bull simply dropped on his back. The impact of the rustler's knees knocked the breath from the smaller man's lungs and sheer weight pinned him helplessly to the ground.

"Said yuh was a two spot," grunted Bull. "Pass me a pigging string, Oregon. This hombre don't know when he's licked. He's trying to drag out a six-gun."

The peppery little tophand was fighting furiously, but the best he could do did not even disturb the rustler—which made Flash madder than ever. A huge hand closed on his wrist and twisted his arm behind his back. Bull pinned the hand with his knee while he twisted up the other; then slowly, methodically wound the cords around both, and fastened the bonds with a knot tied three times. The cords cut into Flash's wrists with every jerk of that tying.

"Now walk," Bull grunted, and lifted the little tophand onto his legs.

Flash walked. Up a steep trail that angled along the hillside, through a belt of scrub pine, and out onto an open space surrounded by larger trees. Here Bull unceremoniously kicked his legs from beneath him. For the second time Flash fell heavily, and before he could recover his breath Bull dragged him to a tree, cut his bonds, and then retied them—more tightly, though with the same triple knot—around the tree trunk.

"Now yuh kin set there an' figure how plumb hasty yuh've been actin'," the big rustler announced grimly. "If you and me is goin' to be pardners, you might as well know from the go-off that I'm the boss. If you was tellin' real facts about breakin' Ace Collins' head I'll be back to let yuh loose by mornin'. If you weren't, it won't be my fault if I don't get back."

"Yuh damn' skunk—" Flash choked.

"Mad, ain't yuh?" grinned the big rustler. "Yuh might try chawin' the bark off that tree. Pitch pine is good medicine for a mean temper. Leastwise it's nasty enough!"

The big rustler guffawed at his own joke and strode off down hill. Flash strained at his bonds. The cords cut into his wrists, but he jerked and twisted in a savage frenzy of rage, disregarding the blood that flowed from his wrists. He heard a single rider gallop off into the hills—Mal Stone, he judged, going by some secret trail to Brockman's Gap and town. A minute later Bull and Oregon rode off down Snake Canyon.

TILL dawn, the big rustler had said. Flash tugged more furiously at his bonds. The cords which bound his wrists burned like bands of fire, but he tugged and pulled none the less for what seemed hours. He was going to get free! His determination to ride Thunderbolt had been no less, and as he had endured the terrible punishment of the stallion's pitching, now he shut his teeth against the pain of his bonds and

tried to pull his wrists through the cords by main strength.

He could not do it. His courage remained resolute to the end, but exhaustion conquered his weary body, and as the first gray light of the false dawn began to filter through the trees he relaxed limply against the trunk to which he had been bound. He felt weak as water. The fiery temper that had spurred him for the last twelve hours had exhausted itself in futile struggles against the torturing cords which still held him fast.

Flash rested his head against the tree trunk and thought over the events of the day: Thunderbolt and Ace Collins, the accusation of Bannister and the ranch buyer's attempt at murder, finally his own fiasco with Bull Mendoza, which had resulted in his present predicament. Little was pleasant to recall. The memory of his words to Tonopah and Claire made him ashamed, but when he brought the account down to the present moment he raised his head erect and managed to grin. A rueful grin—a bitter smile directed at himself and his own folly.

"I jest closed my eyes an' rushed like a bull that's been roped. No wonder I'm hogtied now," he summed up his thoughts aloud. "But—I don't get the hang of it yet. Ace wanted to show me up, an' he done so. Because I flew off the handle I gave him a safe chance for a cold killin', but the only thing else I see is that Bull don't like the hombre what registered the Diamond A brand for us no more'n I do."

The peppery little tophand tugged thoughtfully at his bonds. "Yet he's the rustler, and that iron would sure cover a Tumblin' E convenient," he muttered. "Well—it's easier to unravel a knot than bust the rope!"

With that thought in mind the tophand began to fumble with the cords about his wrists. His own struggles had tightened the knots, and slow, patient effort was foreign to his temper. Again and again he was tempted to pull and twist once more. The red splotch of anger flashed into view on his cheek bones, but he restrained himself, though the effort at self-control twisted his face into angry lines. Little by little his finger nails accomplished the task in which the strength of back and shoulders had failed. At dawn the knot loosened, and he drew his hands free and rose.

The rustlers had left him in a temporary camp close to the crest of the hill. He could look down across the plain and see in the far distance the low buildings of the Tumbling E. He turned, and among the gear the rustlers had left, found his own six-gun where Bull had cast it carelessly aside. Flash pounced on the gun. The weight of it in his holster gave him renewed confidence, and he was on the point of going in search of a horse when he heard hoofs on the stony floor of Snake Canyon.

He jerked out his gun and leaped for the concealment of the pines—but stopped. "That's what any hot headed jasper would do," he gritted to himself. "Even if it is Bull, he ain't any use to me dead, and I sure can't arrest him!"

He turned, forcing himself to return to the tree and pass the cords loosely around his hands as though he were still sitting there, bound. The six-gun he put between his legs where it was concealed by the flap of his chaps. That done, he waited for whoever was coming up the trail. He would not have long to wait; but for the impatient, peppery little tophand every second was an eternity.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Bull Mendoza had finished tying Flash to the tree he rode down Snake Canyon and straight across the plains in the di-

rection of the Tumbling E, with Oregon plugging along a pony's length behind. The squat, burly rustler was puzzled and suspicious. A raid on the Tumbling E had been planned for that night, but he was riding toward the ranch house more to discover what had happened to Ace than to bring off any stock. There were already as many re-branded cows hidden in the hills as Bull considered expedient or safe.

Like most efficient schemes, the system upon which the rustlers operated was simple. Ace and Bull had worked it many times in the Southwest, and on that very account the latter could see no justifiable reason for any change in the procedure. The first step was to register a brand in the name of a dummy or a crooked nester at some inaccessible spot far enough away from the scene of the thefts to be beyond the range of local cowboys.

The next was to find a local nester not averse to the illegal use of a running iron. That was usually not difficult, and from him Bull learned the trails in the territory over which he was to operate—knowledge which it would take a stranger many months to acquire alone.

Finally Ace, posing as a ranch buyer, would open negotiations for the purchase both of the ranch which they intended to steal, and for the range controlled by the local nester. Thereby he gave himself an excuse for frequent visits to his victims, and for almost daily communications by letter and word of mouth with his accomplice—who relayed his instructions to Bull and Oregon in the hills.

The present raid, which the encounter with Flash had interrupted, had been up to that point a typical example of the gang's procedure. Ace had warned them that Flash intended to make a scout. While the tophand searched the hills, Mal Stone busied himself at his ranch like the poverty-stricken nester that he pretended to be. Bull and Oregon hid themselves near a small park, not far from Snake Canyon, where the rustled stock was held. If Flash had happened to stumble upon this spot they would have shot him—as long as he did not, he could have searched elsewhere in the hills for months without finding a blotted brand or a man who was not obviously going about ordinary everyday work.

Such an everyday task had been Mal Stone's ride to the post office at the county seat of Sweetwater. There had been a letter waiting for the nester. In a plain envelope, with a scrawled pencil address, it might have been read by any one in the world. It simply said that Ace Collins would not be able to get to Mal Stone's place on Tuesday, as he had planned. The ranch buyer was sorry, but he was detained at the Tumbling E.

A perfectly innocent letter, as far as its words went, but the meaning they expressed was not the message which Mal Stone derived from the communication. To the nester, what Ace meant was that something would happen at the Tumbling E on Tuesday which would make every one on the ranch neglect to ride the range on Tuesday night; therefore that night would be a favorable time to pick up a few Tumbling E cows.

Hence the nester rode back into the hills and joined Bull and Oregon. At dark the three went to the high land near Snake Canyon and waited for a signal. It came. Far out on the dark plain in the direction of the Tumbling E, small as a pin point but clearly to be seen by eyes which were waiting for just that thing, came the flare of a match.

"Watch close now," Bull had growled. "Ace is gettin' ready to signal whether we should work the north end of the range, or the south."

There was a pause, while match after match was struck out on the plain—the matches with which Flash, in his nerv-

ous anger, was lighting one Durham cigarette after another. But that, of course, the watchers in the hills could not guess.

"What's the matter with Ace?" Bull grumbled. "Thinks we're asleep, huh? Why don't he signal?"

"There it comes!" Mal Stone interrupted.

THREE matches struck in rapid succession. A second of darkness—and another triple flare. The squat rustler rose briskly to his feet.

"They're goin' toward Brockman's Gap," he grunted. "We'll work in from the south, then—"

Bull stopped abruptly, his thought only half spoken. Out on the plain he had seen the flash of a revolver shot. A second flash, and an ejaculation of surprise from Mal Stone proved the sight was no imaginary one born of overstrained eyes.

"Some fella shot—right close to where Ace was signalin'," chattered the nester excitedly. "Bull—do yuh reckon they've caught the boss at it, an' got him?"

"Don't reckon so. But we'll wait awhile," the squat leader answered doubtfully. They had waited, hoping for another signal from Ace, for nearly an hour before Bull made up his mind to go ahead, and they had no more than started before they encountered Flash in Snake Canyon!

Now Bull Mendoza had plenty of courage and no nerves in particular, but that encounter worried him a lot, more than he would have cared to admit. It was the first slip in the gang's methods for a long, long time. Ace had signalled that no Tumbling E puncher would be riding except in the direction of Brockman's Gap, and almost immediately the tophand turns up far to the south.

That was queer, because the ranch buyer wasn't a man who made mistakes; and Flash's story had been considerably queerer. The top-hand shouldn't have known anything about the Diamond A unless he'd wormed the information out of Ace. Bull's first thought had been that the ranch buyer had been shot and wounded, and had betrayed his partners to save his own hide by turning state's evidence, but as Flash went on talking the big rustler had changed his mind.

For if Ace had confessed, a posse—or at least every rider the Tumbling E could muster — would have come straight for the park where the stolen cattle were actually concealed. Instead, Flash had been alone, and although he had given Bull his correct name, his idea that the Diamond A was fifty miles away on the headquarters of Sioux Creek was grotesquely wrong. That the top-hand had been fired and wanted to turn rustler to get square, Bull didn't believe for one second, but he was convinced that something had happened to Ace and that there was a deep laid scheme on foot for his own capture. Ace might even be double-crossing him. Bull didn't trust Ace Collins particularly. He had forced Ace into this steal, and the glib use of his name by Flash stuck in the squat rustler's craw.

There was one other thing which had never happened before. It had been the habit of the gang to sell stolen cattle at distant shipping points as fast as they were stolen, but this time Ace had claimed that was impossible. He had kept Bull busy until there were nearly two hundred head of rebranded stock in the park; and Bull was acutely conscious of the fact that so many cows could not be hidden very long. The Tumbling E was about stolen out. A crash was due, and so Bull had tied up Flash and sent Mal to get an explanation from Ace while he himself scouted cautiously with Oregon.

The two rustlers rode straight toward

the point where Bull had seen the signal and the flash of a pistol. They soon began to pass small bunches of cattle. At the start of the ride they found the cows asleep, but as the time drew close to midnight and the two riders neared the spot where Bull had decided the shooting must have taken place the cows they passed were on foot, grazing.

"That there's a likely bunch," Oregon whispered suddenly. He pointed through the darkness at ten or a dozen cows, young stock, grazing slowly in the direction of the hills from which the rustlers had come. "We don't dast go no closer, Bull," the weak chinned rustler went on. He spoke in a querulous, half fearful whine. "No tellin' what-all has happened to Ace, an'—"

"Shut yore head," growled the squat rustler. Nevertheless he drew rein. He was as close to the Tumbling E as he cared to go. "Ain't nothin' happened to Ace," he continued with gruff reassurance. "Yuh ain't scared, are yuh? I thought I heard yore teeth a-chatterin'."

"No such a thing," protested Oregon.

"Well, now, that's good," answered the leader cunningly. "Ain't nothin' to be scared of anyhow while yo're on that horse. Anybody hereabouts would be lookin' for a friend on that horse. That's why I took him for yuh. You ride on a ways, Oregon, while I get these cows movin'. Don't go more'n a quarter mile. Just keep yore eyes open, 'cause I'm bound to make some noise—"

"Alone?" whined he of the weak chin.

"DON'T see no one to go with yuh, nor, no use for one if yuh ain't scared," Bull sneered, and riding aside, struck one of the cows Oregon had pointed out under the belly with a doubled lariat. The slap of rope on hide and the cow's bawl of protest sounded loudly in the still night. The animal broke into a clumsy gallop toward the hills, followed by the rest of the bunch. Bull followed them without looking backward at his companion. He knew that Oregon was scared, but would stay where he was rather than admit it. By staying he would act as a guard on Bull's trail—which was all the squat rustler wanted.

He was driving the cows along as fast as he could when he heard a shout behind him—a shout drowned in the roar of a six-gun emptied as fast as it could be fanned. Immediately afterward the hard ground resounded with the thumping hoofs of a horse galloping madly in his direction.

Bull swung his mount aside and waited. In an instant Oregon galloped past him.

"I shot a feller. Run!" he shouted when he caught sight of Bull, and flew past. The squat rustler's spurs went home, and his pony leaped on the trail of the roan ridden by Oregon. It was a short race. Bull plied quirt and spur, and though he was the heavier man, he gradually closed the gap between him and his weak-nerved partner until he was able to catch the roan by the bit.

"Who? An' how many hombres was there?" he rasped as the two horses thundered along side by side.

"Jest one," stammered Oregon.

The squat rustler promptly pulled both horses to a standstill and listened. There were no sounds of pursuit.

"Yo're runnin' from yore own shadder, feller," he pronounced grimly. "Shore they was just one? Shore yuh shot him? What kind of feller?"

Oregon swallowed the lump in his throat mastering his fear, while Bull cocked one ear attentively for sounds of pursuit from down the trail. "Kind of tall, thin hombre," he panted. He come ridin' out of the dark before I seen him. 'Hey, Flash!' he sings out. Then I let him have it. He dropped off his pony

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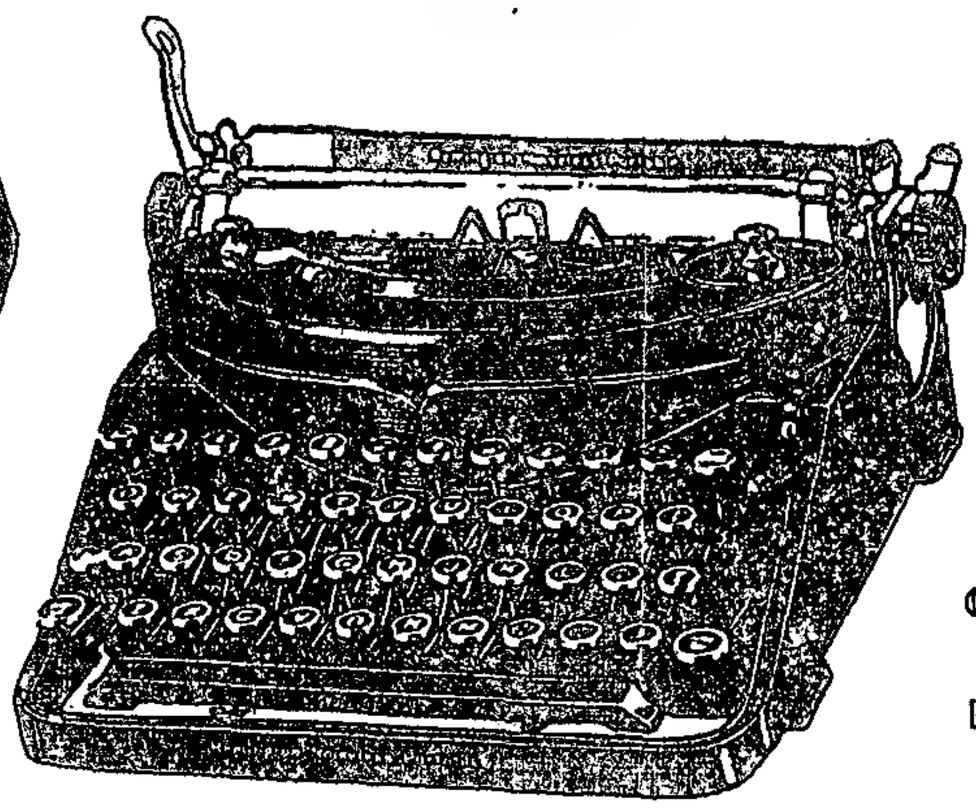

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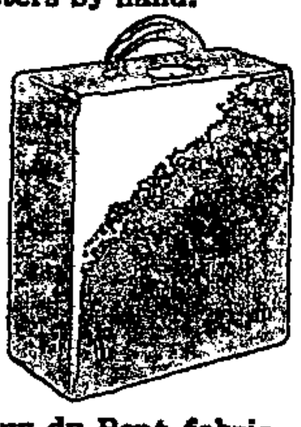

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an' I came a foggin' it—"

"Tall an' thin, huh?" snapped Bull sternly. "Did yuh know his voice? Was it—the boss?"

Oregon shook his head. "Fer Gawd's sake, Bull, let's get goin'," he pleaded. "They's sure to be more of them fellers—"

"Like hell," snapped the squat rustler. He jerked the roan around by the bit. "Yo're goin' back with me an' drive off them cattle," he growled. "I'm goin' to see this hombre yuh say yuh shot. There's something *damn* funny goin' on, an' I'm going to find out what if I have to tangle with the whole Tumbling E!"

Bull meant what he said. By main strength he dragged Oregon back to the bunch of cattle. They were nervous because of the shooting and the horses that had galloped by, and the first crack of Bull's lariat under the belly of the nearest cow sent the whole bunch stampeding for the hills with Oregon galloping after them, thankful to be allowed to put miles between himself and the scene of his victory. The squat rustler watched him go, smiling grimly. He knew that Oregon had shot a man, all right. He had heard the fellow shout, but he was pretty sure that whoever it was had been alone, and recognized the roan ridden by Oregon, had come close without any suspicion.

WHEN he reached the scene of the shooting, however, he was unable to find the body of the dead man. With redoubled caution he walked his pony in a gradually widening spiral until he had traversed every foot of the locality. Still the search was fruitless. He pulled up to listen—confident there had been a dead or wounded man; wondering whether the victim had managed to drag himself away or had been carried off by friends.

Nothing was to be heard but the rustle of wind in the sage, yet the squat outlaw's instinct, sharpened by years spent in avoiding hostile cowpunchers, gave him a hunch to ride toward the distant lights of the Tumbling E ranch house. Bull took pains to make no noise. He rode with his six-gun ready in his hand for fear of ambuscade, calling himself a fool for sticking his head, of his own free will, into what might be a trap; yet riding forward because of a curiosity he could not resist. The identity of the man Oregon had shot, declared his hunch, would be the key to the riddle of the Diamond A, of Ace's unusual acts and Flash's inexplicable knowledge of the rustler's operations.

Nor did the outlaw's hunch play him false. He had not gone far when he perceived another rider ahead of him—a rider who reeled in the saddle from weakness and loss of blood, whose chin was sunk on his breast, and who clung with both hands to the horn to keep from falling, while his unguided pony ambled toward the Tumbling E.

Beyond the fact that the wounded man was tall—and Ace, Bannister, and Tonopah were all tall men—the starlight was much too dim to provide the rustler with any means of identification. Therefore Bull followed at a safe distance until the man reached the Tumbling E and slipped from the saddle just in front of the doorway. The door was thrown open instantly, and Claire darted out.

"Oh—Tonopah!" she cried, and springing forward, tried to drag the foreman inside. Through the doorway, with the lamplight behind revealing them clearly, Bannister and Ace Collins came to her assistance. Collins' head was covered with a bandage, but he walked steadily, and from the easy way he picked up Tonopah's feet, after Bannister had lifted the latter by the shoulders, his injury was evidently not serious.

"Plugged twice. But I reckon he'll live, ma'am," Ace remarked, as he and Bannister lifted the foreman between them.

Claire was already bending over the wounded man. Her reluctant, agonized question called clearly to Bull's ears.

"Who—who done it, Tonopah?" she asked.

"Flash," the foreman groaned. "I'm sure sorry as hell, Miss Claire, but there ain't no doubt. I heard some fellers driving cattle. When I come up Flash was sitting on the roan he took from Ace. When I hailed him he cut down on me—me that used to be his sidekick."

The girl caught her breath.

"Don't waste no tears on the damn thievin', murderin' whelp," commanded her father roughly. "We all ought to thank Ace for showin' us what he was. Ace an' me both told Tonopah that Flash wouldn't come back exceptin' he brought his gang; but Tonopah he allowed different. Claimed Flash was hasty but not mean. Reckon yuh've changed your mind now, ain't yuh?" demanded the ranchman.

"Plumb complete," grunted the wounded foreman.

The door of the ranch house closed upon them, and out on the plain Bull turned his pony and set out at a lope for Snake Canyon. The riddle which had perplexed the squat outlaw was three-quarters solved.

"Ace is in solid, an' the peppery little feller was tellin' the real facts," he muttered to himself as he rode. "He's sure in poison bad with his own outfit, thanks to Oregon an' me." To Bull the ironical situation in which he had placed the little tophond was pleasant. He chuckled to himself, but a moment later the rustler's brutal, unshaven face became sober as he recollected that one-quarter of his riddle remained a mystery. "But how'd Flash know there was a hombre named Mendoza with the Diamond A," he continued suspiciously. "Damned if I trust him yet, an' hell damn if I ain't interested in what Ace is goin' to tell Mal Stone!"

CHAPTER V

Flash Catches the Reins

BULL overtook Oregon and the stolen cattle at the mouth of Snake Canyon just as dawn turned the east from black to gray.

"Yuh look like yuh didn't figure on seein' me again," he jeered, for the weak chinned cowpuncher grinned with relief when his leader rode up. "Yuh had no call to high tail it so damn fast. Feller yuh shot was their foreman, an' he was alone. I went to the Tumblin' E to find out, an' found out plenty more. Yuh listenin'?"

Oregon nodded. "Well, see yuh don't do no *talkin'*." Bull threatened. "I found out that fellow we tied up is playin' square with us—prob'ly. But the Tumblin' E thinks it was him that shot the foreman, 'cause I made yuh ride his roan, see. Now don't yuh tell him anything different, an' then if he does try to double cross us, he'll shore stick his nose into hot grease if he goes back to them. You an' me are goin' to tell him we had no special trouble on this raid, savvy?' '

"Won't tell him we shot nobody, yuh mean?" asked Oregon.

"Didn't even *see* nobody," declared the squat rustler sternly. "We just run back these cows, which we'll make him help brand. Yuh savvy? Then sashay 'em along!"

Bull was so confident that there would be no pursuit from the Tumbling E that he did not take the trouble to drive the stolen cattle to the hidden park nor blind the trail with his usual care.

Both he and Oregon were tired and hungry. They made short work of the drive up the canyon, and flung the cattle into the thick brush beyond the crest, where they could be picked up later on. That done they rode for the camp where Flash had been left.

To all appearance the little tophand was still bound to the tree where he had been left. He did not move nor raise his head when the two rustlers approached. The red spot of color flaming on his cheekbones would have warned any one who knew him well, but all Bull could see was the bowed head, the weary droop to the shoulders, and the cord still wound around blood-stained wrists.

Both rustlers were dismounting when Flash's hand darted from behind his back into his lap and out again, holding a six-gun; he was on his feet with the Colt aimed at the pit of Bull's stomach, the barrel wavering just enough to cover Oregon also.

"Reach high!" Flash grated.

They reached, taken too much by surprise even to attempt resistance, and the peppery little tophand grinned. He had been looking forward to this moment and enjoyed it. Oregon's eyes were staring from his head, and the sight of Bull's open mouth, the huge paws lifted helplessly into the air, made the tophand feel he was even for the way those same hands had jerked him off his pony and lashed him to a tree.

"Yuh've stole some cattle," Flash stated grimly. "Hombres, I got yuh dead to rights. Unbuckle your belts. One at a time—yuh first, Bull, bein' as your oldest an' ugliest."

The squat rustler shrugged. His belt tumbled to the ground at his feet, and a second later Oregon's followed suit. Flash stepped forward and threw both belts over his shoulders, Bull's Colt he drew from the holster with his left hand, and while both rustlers stared he suddenly placed its muzzle against Oregon's side.

"Git goin'," said the tophand between his teeth. "Walk slow to that tree I was sittin' an' put your arms around it. If I feel yuh wiggle I'll send daylight plumb through your ribs."

His right hand gun Flash kept aimed steadily at Bull's stomach. His eyes never left the big rustler, but he moved backward step by step with Oregon, keeping his left hand gun in contact with the cowpuncher's body until the latter stopped by the tree and obediently flung his arms around it. Then Flash stopped alertly, and bound Oregon's hands with the same cords which had held him throughout the night.

"You're actin' in a hell of a way for a hombre that wanted to join us," growled Bull. The squat rustler was licking his lips nervously. He hadn't any idea what was coming next, but whatever it was it promised to be unpleasant.

"Should've thought of that before yuh tied me up," retorted Flash. "Yuh gave me some strong medicine, feller, an' it cured me complete. While I was wrastlin' with them ropes it come to me I didn't need to join yuh fellers no more."

"Thinkin' of goin' back to the Tumblin' E?" asked Bull softly.

THE tophand drew the last knot about Oregon's hands tight with a jerk which made the cowpuncher whine with pain. Without answering he slipped Bull's gun back into the holster and dropped both belts on the ground, taking care they were out of reach of Oregon's feet. Then he stepped toward Bull.

"Later," Flash answered. *"Right now yo're goin' to take me to those rustled cattle!"*

Involuntarily Bull stepped back a pace. Flash's forefinger was holding

back the trigger of his Colt, and his thumb was cocking and uncocking the hammer in a way to send shivers up the spine of a man in front of the muzzle.

"That's right—keep on backin' up till you're against that big tree," gritted the tophand. "I owe yuh plenty for manhandlin' me last night, an' if yuh don't tell where those cows are I'll give yuh what Jack Slade gave Jules Beni!"

The squat rustler's eyes snapped. He knew the story—every Westerner knew it: how Slade had tied the French Canadian to the snubbing post in a corral and practiced marksmanship on him half of one day, wounding him in a dozen places before he ended the torture with one merciful shot. Flash looked as if he meant what he said. The spots of color were flaming on his cheekbones, and the hammer of the Colt rose and fell under his thumb like the swaying head of a coiled rattler, but Bull set his teeth and set his back against the tree.

"Yo're bluffin'. Shoot!" he growled.

The tophand shot. The bullet sent slivers from the tree trunk within an inch of the rustler's ear. A second later another bullet thumped into the wood on the underside of his head. Bull's face went white under the unshaven whiskers, but he shook his head with determination.

"Told yuh yo' were bluffin'," he gasped hoarsely.

The little tophand lowered the Colt. He was almost as white of face as his target.

"I was—an' yuh got nerve—pardner," he answered with bitter sarcasm in the last word. "Damn if Col. Colt evens it up between big hombres and little ones after all! I can't shoot yuh, but either you'll show me where those cows are, or I'll take orders from now on!" As he spoke Flash slammed his gun into the holster, unbuckled the heavy belt, and tossed it over a convenient tree limb. Swiftly he bent and unbuckled his spurs; tossed his vest aside, and then advanced on tiptoe toward the bigger man.

Bull watched the whole procedure, scowling. It was inconceivable to him that the top-hand should throw away his advantage in this fashion, but the bow-legged little man's doubled fists and set face were unmistakable evidence of his desire to fight for the mastery man to man. With a grunt of satisfaction Bull put down his head and rushed, his huge fists swinging.

Either of the wild swings would have ended the fight, but the rustler's fists flailed empty air, and the right hook Flash shot across as he side-stepped the clumsy rush caught Bull behind the ear. The rustler saw stars; he staggered, stumbled, and nearly fell.

"Yuh damn little terrier!" Bull grunted, and rushed again. Once more Flash slipped aside, but this time as the bigger man charged past him he leaped in himself, and ducking under the rustler's lumbering counter, his fists beat a tattoo against Bull's stomach and side. Four punches, upper cuts all, thudded home before the big man tried to clinch and Flash had to duck and dance away again. He left Bull panting, and seeing it, the tophand feinted, side stepped a left lead, and countered with a straight right to the heart that stopped Bull's rush and shook the big man to his heels.

"Col. Colt wasn't needed nohow," grinned the tophand, dancing out of reach. "Feller, yuh ain't got no more show than a rattler agin a king snake!"

Bull was panting. The last punch had hurt and slowed him down; but he rushed again, enraged that a grinning, bow-legged little man scarcely half his size should be wearing him down. He managed to land a glancing swing on the top of Flash's head, and received in return three solid short arm jolts to the

heart and solar plexus. At that second Bull knew, as a fighter will, that he was licked unless he could land a lucky punch, but he was neither a quitter nor very much disheartened.

The big man took a terrific beating in the next five minutes without landing a blow. He had begun to gasp and reel; instead of hitting he was trying to clinch and get the smaller man into the grip of his arms. He drove Flash across the clearing—almost succeeded in cornering him in the brush at the clearing's edge, but, warned by the shadows of the pine branches overhead, the tophand crouched and twisted from beneath the paw that clutched for his shoulder.

YET the very speed with which Flash dodged was his undoing. His boot slipped on the pine needles. He fell to hands and knees, and with a grunt of triumph Bull turned and jumped, spurred heels first, for the small of the little tophand's back. By an inch Flash rolled out of the way; rolled over and over, scrambled to his feet, barely escaping the kick aimed at his head—to see Bull stop glaring, five feet away.

The squat rustler despaired of another opportunity equal to the one he had just missed. Instead of another lumbering rush at his elusive enemy he turned and plunged for the six-gun Flash had hung on the tree. Bull was the nearer by ten feet. Flash had no chance to beat him to the gun. He might have grappled with the rustler as the latter seized it, but gun or no gun the tophand was lost once the rustler laid hands on him.

Quick as Bull himself, Flash turned his back on his enemy and sprinted for the two Colts he had flung at Oregon's feet. Both men had ten yards to run, and what Flash lost at the start he gained by speed of foot. The two laid hands on the weapons at the same instant. Both lost a precious second shaking their gun out of the leather, both fired at the same instant—Bull as he turned, swinging the Colt on the level of his shoulder, Flash as he crouched, pulling trigger without raising the revolver from the ground.

The reports were simultaneous. Lead burned by the tophand's cheek and thudded into the tree behind him; Bull uttered a roar of pain. The gun dropped from the rustler's hand and he clutched at his right forearm where Flash's bullet had cut through the muscles.

"An' that's that, yuh yaller dog!" snarled the tophand. He thumbed back the hammer for a second shot and levelled the Colt slowly at Bull's head. "An' now, damn yuh, *where are them cows?*"

The blood was running through the squat rustler's fingers. His unshaven face was distorted by the pain of the wound, and though he showed no visible mark from Flash's fists, he was breathing in hoarse gasps from the body blows he had received. For perhaps a second he delayed his answer. Then he suddenly kicked the Colt far out of reach and sat down.

"I give yuh best," he growled. "The cows are penned in a park about five miles from here. Now yuh know, what do yuh figger on doin'?"

"Take yuh there an' count 'em," Flash grinned. "Mal Stone is goin' to find us workin' mighty friendly when he gits back—so friendly I'll crack down on him before he can blink, like I did with you two. Then I'll take all three of yuh back to Bannister's."

The squat rustler shrugged, and in that moment of excitement and triumph, Flash did not notice that Bull's unshaven lips also smiled—a grim sardonic smile, instantly concealed.

CHAPTER VI

A Burr Beneath the Saddle

MEANWHILE back in the Tumbling E ranch house both Ace Collins and Tonopah passed an easy night. By breakfast time the poker faced old foreman was able to sit up, and though he was weak from loss of blood he had already recovered so much that when Claire brought him a bowl of soup he demanded—persistently and in vain—"beef steak, pertaters, an' all the fixin's."

As for Ace, the bandage around his head was the only reminder that he had been hurt at all. He wandered from room to room through the house, strolled out to the corral and sat on the fence for half an hour watching Thunderbolt stamp up and down the enclosure and whistled thoughtfully to himself. Inside, Claire washed up the breakfast dishes.

Secretly Ace was delighted that Tonopah was disabled. The bullets which had struck the foreman down had removed Flash's best friend from the scene of active operations and destroyed the last vestige of faith in the tophand's honesty. Bannister moped about the ranch with the dispirited air of a man whose beloved son has turned criminal. Claire went about her tasks mechanically. Her face was pale and drawn by sleeplessness and grief, and the gloom of both was balm to the hawknosed ranch buyer's soul. He felt the game was in his hands. Claire and Bannister and Flash, even Bull and Oregon and Mal Stone, were all his puppets. For months he had made them dance almost as he pleased. Now the time had come to destroy part of them.

Ace had done enough rustling. He wanted to marry Claire and set himself up for a respectable cattleman if he could. If he couldn't, he intended to make this steal his last, take the entire loot of the Tumbling E for his own, and really buy a ranch in an adjoining state. He knew he could never be rid of his rustler confederates until they were dead, so he coolly made up his mind to kill them. An ambush in which they would all be shot down together would be the surest, safest way, and now that Flash was at large in the hills Ace determined to arrange such an ambuscade at once.

The thought of the peppery little tophand wandering around in the roughs beyond Snake Canyon gave the hawknosed man cold chills down his back. Flash might find the rustled cattle. He might capture Bull. Worst of all he might join the rustler and discover Ace's connection with the gang. He might—

"Hell, he ain't goin' to live long enough to do nothin'!" Ace muttered.

Already he had taken a desperate chance to prevent Flash from getting into the hills. He had wanted to make the tophand quit, make him leave in fury, but shrewdly as he had counted on the little fellow's fiery temper, he had underestimated its impetuousness. Ace had never dreamed that Flash would insist on riding to the Diamond A, nor be able to persuade Bannister to go along.

If the four men had proceeded to the headwaters of Sioux Creek they would have found exactly nothing. The noose of suspicion Ace had cast around Flash would have fallen harmlessly away.

On that account Ace had accused the tophand of signalling to the rustlers and then tried to kill him. It was a desperate expedient, but a desperate chance had to be taken. Ace had called for a raid himself so that when he killed Flash, the fact that there really had been a raid would seem to justify both the accusation and the killing.

Flash, however, had been too quick

for him; so now the ranch buyer meditated a second scheme—not so dangerous, and far more certain.

FOR half an hour Ace perched on the fence planning a double cross by means of which his rustler-partners would be killed, and his own standing with Bannister and Claire made more secure. He worked his scheme out, tested it mentally from every angle; then swung himself to the ground and walked purposely into the ranch house. Bannister was sitting on a stool, staring at the open fire. Claire, her work done, was sitting at his feet. She was dressed in the short skirt and gray flannel blouse she was accustomed to wear on rides to town, but though her quirt was in her hands she was sitting as though she would remain where she was all day. She and her father stared gloomily into the fire, saying nothing.

"I'm right sorry to leave you-all, but I plain got to get back to town," Ace began abruptly. "Told Mal Stone I'd let him know today, yes or no, about buyin' his ranch."

"If you'll wait a minute I'll ride in with yuh," said Claire.

For an instant Ace hesitated. He didn't want the girl along while he did the business he had in mind, but he did want, very much, to talk to her alone. When she made the suggestion, his acceptance was enthusiastic.

"That'll be fust rate," he answered. "Ain't no cowboy in the county wouldn't whoop over that, Claire!"

The girl shrugged. Ace saw the moment was not propitious for romance, and at once he initiated his more sinister plan. "And—er—a—Bannister," he went on apologetically, and suddenly addressing the girl's father. "Yuh won't think I'm mixin' in your business when I say the Tumblin' E is downright short handed? Why don't yuh let me hire five-six new punchers? Good men—an' enough of them so we can round up the hills for rustlers. Git rid of all the thieves at one drive, hey?"

The ranchman pulled at his long mustache a moment. "Do as yuh think best, Ace," he muttered. "Flash has proved he's a killer an' a coyote, but I just can't make myself hate him like I'd ought—still, git me half a dozen punchers. Gunslingers, if they kin be found."

"That all right with you, Claire?" Ace asked daringly.

The girl arose, shaking her brown hair back from her eyes. Her features were usually animated, but this morning they might have been cut from marble; her voice was cold as stone.

"I reckon rustlers—have to be stopped. I ain't worryin' about the *ranch* none," she answered—and for the first time Ace noticed the engagement ring was gone from her finger.

"Then I'll hire six gun toters," he retorted swiftly, and turned to walk out. Ace had to move quickly to conceal his satisfaction. If he stayed with the Bannisters his face was going to break into a triumphant grin. Somewhat to his surprise Claire followed. In silence she saddled her own pony—so quickly that he was unable to finish saddling up himself in time to help her—and in silence she rode with him to the county seat. Ace made no attempt to start a conversation. They rode across the sage like two gloomy, preoccupied ghosts, and Claire rewarded Ace for that two hours of self-restraint by smiling sadly at him as they dismounted at the post office.

"I'm packin' too much grief to be good company. I'm sorry," she apologized. "I got to write Flash—it's hard to hurt an old friend, that trusted yuh, ain't it?"

"Yes ma'am," said Ace, who didn't think it hard at all—only dangerous. "Will yuh be long? I'm goin' into the saloon across the street to find Mal Stone. If he ain't there I'll have to write

myself. Made up my mind not to buy his ranch. I can swing somethin' larger."

"I—I won't be long," said Claire sadly. She walked into the post office, while Ace sauntered across the street. Mal Stone was not in the bar-room, and the hawknosed ranch buyer looked no further. He didn't expect to see the nester, who at that moment should have been far away in the hills behind Snake Canyon. He was simply waiting until Claire had had time to complete her letter. He didn't want to write the rustlers their orders while she might glance over his shoulder and learn too much.

AS he entered the post office, however, Claire tore up the sheet she was writing and began again—by writing the date and then staring at the paper. She moved aside to give Ace room at the writing shelf—a five foot pine plank, hacked and notched by the pocket knives of idle cowpunchers waiting for mail to be distributed, and provided with two bottles of gummy ink and three woe-begone pens.

"Will yuh address an' mail this for me?" Claire demanded. "There's goin' to be something in it. I don't want the postmaster to know too much."

"Sure," said Ace. As he spoke he started so violently that the girl looked up. "Nothin'," he mumbled hastily. To cover his excitement he seized pen and envelope.

Staring at them through the post office window was the last man Ace expected to see. Mal Stone stood on the sidewalk, frowning angrily at Collins. A motion of the nester's head was a peremptory order for Ace to come outside.

"There's Mal now," Ace muttered.

Claire took a fresh grip on her pen and impulsively wrote half a dozen words. Without pausing to blot the wet ink she pulled Flash's engagement ring out of the pocket of her skirt, folded it in the paper, and handed the whole to Ace.

"That's—that's all. Yuh can mail it," she stammered. "Address it to him in care of General Delivery." Her features were still as white and lifeless as marble, but her eyes were wet, so that she was blinking rapidly to keep back the tears.

"Givin' back his ring, huh?" Ace exclaimed exultantly. "Yo're right. When a hombre turns rustler—"

"I don't want to talk about it none," Claire snapped. "I told him I'd keep it till I was shore. After what he done to Tonopah I reckon I am shore, but Flash was—was—"

The hawknosed ranch buyer, however, was in no mood to listen to praise of a rival he had vanquished. He sealed the letter and thrust it through the mail slot, and then, with a reassuring nod to Claire, stepped outside and walked up to Mal.

"Yuh look like a cloud bust gettin' ready to break," he challenged the nester sharply.

"Yeah? Well, what the hell is goin' on? Yuh gettin' careless, or fixin' up a cold deck for yore pardners—which?" snorted the nester. "We started a raid last night accordin' to yore signals, and who stops us in Snake Canyon but Flash Hefferidge."

"Did you kill him?" Ace snapped.

"Hell no! He was telling a fool story about bein' run off the ranch an' wantin' to join us. Said him an' Bull was pardners in the Diamond A. What me and Bull wants to know," went on the nester fiercely, "is how Flash knowed Bull's name unless yuh told him. If you're runnin' a cold deck on us—" from his great height the lean nester stared grimly down into the ranch buyer's eyes. "I seen yuh sparkin' that Bannister gal," he threatened softly. "Don't yuh run after no skirt till our business is finished entire."

"Wolfish, ain't yuh?" Ace retorted. Another man, thus accused to his face of exactly the treachery he had in mind, might have been flustered, but Ace was not the leader of his gang by accident. He thought faster and farther than the men he led. "Suppose yuh quit howlin' an' listen to me. What did yuh do with Flash?"

"Bull was settin' on his haid when I left," chuckled the nester. "But yore signals was wrong an' he sent me to find out howcome—"

"We can steal the Tumblin' E blind an' blame it on Flash, that's howcome!" Ace snapped. "Keep your voice down, yuh flap-eared bean pole. The girl thinks I'm refusin' to buy your ranch. Never mind about those names. I gave them to the Cattleman's Association, if yuh want to know, an' they gave them to that old fool of a Bannister, see? Flash gets red hot an' quits, sluggin' me over the head on the way, then he comes back an' shoots Tonopah."

"Didn't know that."

"YUH don't know nothin'!" Ace sneered. "You an' Bull kin take orders. Takes me to think them up, don't it? Here's some more: high tail it back to the park an' shoot Flash!"

"Huh?"

"Yuh heard me," Ace gritted savagely. "Ride up an' plug him like a kioty wolf. I don't care if his hands is tied behind his back. Kill him. Once he's dead we can hang all the stealin' we been doin' since fall onto him. Savvy?"

"Somewhat," said the nester grimly. "All right, I'll plug him. But why are yuh in such a damn sweat to git it done quick?"

"Because tonight they ain't no one ridin' for the Tumblin' E," Ace rasped. "When yuh bump off Flash, all of yuh high tail it down the south side of the range, go right up to the ranch house an' steal anything in sight. Make all the noise yuh damn please for the next three nights. Tonopah's shot, and old Bannister is mopin' in a corner.

"We can git two hundred head easy; then we'll drive the whole bunch away as soon as the Tumblin' E hires punchers. Bannister ain't hired no one yet, an' he ain't goin' to hire nary cowpuncher while I can prevent it—but we can't have Flash knowin' all that goes on. The old man's kind of soft about him. So's the gal, for all she just mailed him back his ring."

Little by little the anger and suspicion left Mal Stone's face. He was grinning when Ace finished. "Nobody ridin' the range, huh? Yuh sure are a wonder to stack a deck, Ace," he said admiringly. "Guess I better cut down on Flash as soon as I ride up, huh? Bull might not stand for a killin' if he knowed it was coming off."

"Right. Bull's funny thataway," Ace agreed. "Pour leather into yore pony all the way back, for we want to raid tonight for sure. Mind—there won't be a rider on the Tumblin' E range!"

"Easy pickin's!" the nester grinned. He vaulted into the saddle and quirted his pony into a run almost before his lean figure settled in the leather. The pony went down the main street with a rush, and in a moment Stone was out of town, heading in a bee line toward Snake Canyon.

"Easy pickin's—for me, yuh poor dumb fool!" Ace muttered sarcastically. "I'll say they're easy, when every one believes what I tell them instead of using their heads! Do yore cold killin' and then ride to the Tumblin' E, careless like, hombre. There's goin' to be six gunslingers on the range tonight, with me to lead them. And then—"

Ace snapped his fingers. That was how quickly his rustler partners would be killed, that was how easy he would make himself first the boss, and eventually the owner of the Tumbling E.

He was smiling when he went to rejoin Claire. "Let's go an' hire them gunslingin' cowpunchers for your daddy," he greeted her. "I noticed quite a few in the saloon. I was thinkin'," he went on, "that Flash an' his rustlers might figure they could steal the range blind while Tonopah was laid up. I'm goin' to take my men and hide out in a wash for the next two-three nights. Any suspicious hombres we see will stop lead pronto!"

Ace grinned wolfishly at the girl. "Huh?" he demanded.

"I—I reckon so," she faltered. But she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Blink as fast as she could, she was unable to prevent a tear from rolling down her cheeks, and while Ace hired his new cowboys she stood by, her face set, her eyes gazing down the street toward the hills, which lay ruddily amethyst beneath the noonday sun.

CHAPTER VII

Mal Stone's Orders

DURING that afternoon and evening Ace carried out his plans without hitch. No general of an army ever received more unquestioning obedience. The six punchers he hired in town took his orders as a matter of course, and both Claire and Bannister were content to give the tall, hawknosed one a free hand. He procrastinated over the hiring of the men, so that it was dusk before the little army arrived at the Tumbling E. Immediately he sent the horse wrangler to round up mounts for the new men, and then dispatched the wrangler back to town with the livery stable hacks on which the new hands had arrived. This removed Flash's last friend from the ranch, and as soon as the man was gone, Ace released all the extra mounts. Thunderbolt alone remained in the corral.

Black, starless night had fallen by the time his preparations were completed. He got his men into the saddle hastily, and with Bannister riding silently at his bridle hand, led the way to a shallow wash two miles from the ranch house and in the direction of Snake Canyon. A large bunch of cattle were grazing near-by, and at sight of them Ace grunted approvingly.

"This here's made to order," he commented aloud. "Git off yore ponies an' line up along the wash. If any jaspers come by wait till I blaze away an' then all of yuh cut loose. Make yourselves comfortable, with yo' carbines handy. We'll likely have quite a spell to wait."

Privately Ace didn't believe he and his men would have to remain in ambush more than an hour, and when his men settled themselves along the rim of the wash he saw to it they kept vigilant. There was a chance, of course, that the rustlers would be content with the cattle they could pick up nearer the hills, but out on the plains there was no wash which would provide such an effective ambuscade.

Sooner or later they would come to him, and Ace curbed his impatience as best he could, straining his eyes toward the hills for the first glimpse of three mounted men riding through the dark, and wondering what had happened inside Snake Canyon when Mal Stone reached the rustler's camp.

Back in the hills Flash also had been in complete control of the situation. All opposition ended with the bullet he sent through Bull Mendoza's arm. The squat ranchman led the way sullenly, through devious trails, to the park where the cattle were hidden. It was an ideal spot for the purposes of a rustler. A small stream foamed down the mountainside through a narrow canyon cut in the reddish rock. On left and right stretched a barrier of cliffs that appeared unbroken, and Flash had thought he

was being deliberately led astray when Bull guided his horse into the bed of the rushing stream.

From a point twelve feet above the water dashed down a stretch of gravel a little flatter than the rest of the stream's bed.

"You'll have to spur yore pony," grunted the rustler. "Our hawses know where they're goin'."

The three spurred their mounts up the stretch of gravel bottom. Swift as the water flowed, it was not more than fetlock deep, and the bottom provided unexpectedly good footing. Just beyond the top the way was barred by three strands of barbed wire carelessly twisted around posts set against the canyon walls. Bull dropped the wires to the ground and led the horses over them.

"An' here we are," he growled. "There's another way out where the stream follows down through the bush. We could run the stock out that way if we had to, but it's steeper than this. Don't ever need no barbed wire. Our regular camp's a little further along."

Flash looked about him. The reddish cliffs which had seemed a part of the mountainside when looked at from below were actually a dike of rock running parallel with the hillside. Between them and the mountainside was a space nearly a mile long and nearly two hundred yards wide. The soil had been washed down from the hills above. No trees grew upon it, but the grass had been thick—had been, because the entire park was crowded with cattle, all branded the Diamond A. They had nearly exhausted the feed, and the tophand saw that even if he had not put a stop to the rustler's activities they would soon have been forced to move the herd.

FLASH dismounted his prisoners in front of the shack they had built. Their guns he threw inside, loosened his own Colt in the holster, and settled down on the beach outside the door to wait. Oregon whined that his bonds hurt, and Flash cut him free. At once the cowhand drew a pack of cards from his chaps pockets. He and Bull began a game of seven up, while Flash smoked and watched them. At noon they ate. Afterward the game was resumed, and the day dragged endlessly on.

"Was Ace Collins the boss yuh sent Mal to see? Yuh knew him an' his roan," Flash asked when the monotony had become intolerable to his impetuous temper.

"Know most hombres about here, includin' you," Bull grunted. "Seen Ace often. He's thinkin' of buyin' Mal Stone's ranch. We was shore hopin' he would buy, and stock it heavy. We'd astole him blind in a week."

The squat rustler played a card absent-mindedly.

"Did yuh really want to join up with us last night?" he continued. "I'm still curious how the Cattleman's Association had our names so pat. Why did old Bannister write 'em now, when the Tumblin' E was about stole out?"

"Figure Ace put him up to it. Must've," said the tophand. "Yeah, I was givin' it to yuh straight last night. I was crazy mad. I've seen things different ever since I skinned my hands on your ropes."

Bull grunted and scowled. "There's a power of cattle here," he insinuated. "Yuh can have a fifth. Mebbe a fourth. Cracking down on Mal Stone may not be so plumb easy as yuh figger. He's plenty sudden with a shooting iron."

"Nope," said Flash. "I ain't going to double-cross Tonopah an' Claire none. Yuh can save yore wind. And I call it plumb easy to get the drop on a man that ain't expectin' nothing. I hear Mal comin'. You two keep still—'cause if yuh shout he may make a play for his

gun, an' I don't want to have to shoot him."

The setting sun had dipped behind the hills and dusk was gathering in the park, when the tall, lanky nester rode into sight. He sat carelessly in the saddle, his right hand hooked in his gun-belt near the butt of his Colt and beyond a slight frown which drew his reddish brows into an unbroken line above his crafty eyes, took no notice of the fact that Flash was at liberty and to all appearance on the best of terms with the rustlers.

"Howdy," said the nester, and drew rein directly in front of the tophand.

Flash was waiting for him to dismount. A man with nerve enough can throw himself out of the saddle and behind the shelter of his pony's body as fast as a six-gun can be drawn. But the nester sat motionless.

"See they've untied yuh," he said hoarsely. "Well—"

His hand gripped gun butt. The Colt leaped forward and across his body.

The suddenness and surprise of the attack lost Flash a precious tenth second. His muscles were keyed for his own draw, but in the act of making it the blue gleam of the nester's gun, already out of the holster, warned the tophand he would never live to shuck his Colt in the orthodox fashion. Instinctively his right hand jammed the butt of the six-gun down to the bench, pointing it holster and all in the general direction of the nester, and his left hand palm fanned the hammer in a booming roar of blended reports that emptied the cylinder in a brace of seconds.

Mal Stone had been too sure of himself. He had drawn for a carefully aimed shot that would take the unsuspicious tophand between the eyes. Instead six bullets sprayed from the seated man. The nester's Colt exploded in the air. Over his lean face came an expression of ludicrous amazement. He pitched from the saddle head first to the dust at Flash's feet.

BULL leaped to his feet, sensing with the instinct of a gunfighter that Flash's gun was empty, but the tophand was too quick. With the sixth shot he leaped through the door, snatched the extra guns, and was out again, a Colt in both hands, as Bull stooped to retrieve the nester's weapon.

"Straighten up, feller!" the tophand grated. The red patches flamed in his cheeks, and Bull flung both hands into the air. At that instant the squat rustler's life hung on the stiffness of a Colt's sear spring. Flash, who had ridden up Snake Canyon the night before would have shot in a spasm of blind, unreasoning rage, but for the moment's pause which that stiff spring gave him. In that instant Flash had time to gain caution; the desire to shoot burned in his eyes, but the bitter experience of the past twenty-four hours gave the tophand strength to master his own temper. "Kick that gun toward me an' let Oregon tend to the damn sidewinder," he ordered grimly, indicating the fallen nester's weapon. "Meanwhile—did yuh know this was comin' off, hombre?"

"Damned if I did!" said Bull.

"Then it was boss's orders," Flash snapped. "Don't you go lookin' around, hombre, makin' up yore mind to lie! Mal rode up to kill me. I've ridden range with the damn skunk—he ain't got the gimp to do a killin' all on his own. Now—*who's yore boss?*"

"Mal's livin'," Oregon interrupted in an excited stammer. "He's plugged in the leg and creased alongside the head—"

"Be a damn wonder if I plugged him square, fannin' thataway," Flash snapped. "Come clean, Bull! You're goin' down to the Tumblin' E tonight tied hand an' foot, and they'll sweat it out of yuh there!"

"It's Ace Collins," muttered the rustler.

"Thought so," said Flash. "He was the only hombre that hated me that much. Hope he's still at the Tumblin' E when I bring yuh all there! Sit down, feller. Lift your hands over your head. I'm goin' to tie yuh up."

Bull sat down as he was commanded, and from behind, taking care to keep out of the clutch of the rustler's powerful hands, Flash passed the rope around his wrists and drew the knots tight. The rustler, however, made no attempt to turn the tables.

"I wouldn't be in no hurry to make that ride," he remarked as Flash stepped back. "Things have happened at the Tumblin' E yuh don't savvy. Fust off, last night Oregon shot Tonopah. He was able to drag himself back to the ranch. I follered, an' I'm tellin' yuh real facts. Tonopah thinks it was you that shot him. If yuh bring us in, him an' Bannister will only believe yo're double crossin' yore own gang. *An' I'll tell them the same.*"

"Tonopah thinks I shot him," muttered the tophand aghast.

"They all do," said the rustler positively. "Even the gal. Yo're a proven thief an' killer. *I* know yuh ain't, but if yuh take me back to hang, ain't I goin' to try to have you swing from the same cottonwood limb? Reckon so!"

The rustler laughed grimly. "Yore name an' mine is on that Diamond A filing," he reminded.

"Mal's comin' around," Oregon interrupted.

Flash stepped forward thoughtfully. He put a gun against the cowpuncher's back, sat him down, and tied him as Bull was tied. Looking up, he saw that the nester's eyes were open.

"You're going to cash in, Mal," Flash said instantly.

The tall nester groaned and shuddered.

"Bull told me about Ace. I know he told yuh to git me," the tophand went on. "Yuh might as well spill the rest of it, feller. Don't make no difference to *you*. What happened in town?"

"Nothin'," the nester groaned. "Ace come in with Claire Bannister. I seen her stick your ring in an envelope. She's done with *you*," he went on with unexpected malevolence. "She an' Ace were right friendly—"

"You lie," said the tophand savagely.

The nester shook his head. Despite the pain of his wounds, which made him believe he was goin' to die, he was able to smile at the agonized pallor his news of Claire brought to the tophand's countenance. "Yeah, she give yuh the mitten," he continued. "Weren't nothing else. Ace told me there'll be no Tumblin' E riders on the range tonight. I was to bump yuh off, an' then raid with Bull."

Flash made no answer. He remained squatting on his heels, and slowly his chin sunk on his breast. At the movement he almost would have preferred that Ace's plans had been carried out to the letter. "Claire—Claire said she'd keep the ring till she was *sure*," he muttered.

"Yuh see where yuh stand," Bull cut in softly. "Are yuh goin' to go back—to have yore girl give yuh the go-by to yore face, an' git hanged afterward? Or are yuh goin' to ride out of here with us—rich?"

FLASH looked upward inquiringly.

"Shore—rich," the squat rustler asserted. "A quarter share in these cows if yuh throw in with us."

"After shootin' yuh up?" Flash demanded. The rustler silenced his protest by a shrug of irritation.

"We ain't kids. We aimed to do as much for you—even Mal, who ain't goin' to die none. This hole in my arm don't amount to anything. I'm think-

in' of my neck—like you ought to be of yours. Ace has been makin' too many mistakes. He's hangin' around that Bannister filly. He's lost his head complete. I'm goin' to leave him the gal, if he thinks more of her than his own partners, an' drive to hell out of here. Come along an' you'll git Ace's share instead of a knotted rope under yore ear. What say?"

Bull was so sure of the little tophand's answer that as he ended he held out his bound wrists to be cut free. Flash did not reply at once. If he joined the rustler he had everything to gain; if he refused—Flash wondered what would happen if he refused. He could not foresee it nor guess; yet at the last he shook his head.

"I like yuh, Bull," he answered hesitantly. "I own yo're talkin sense as yuh see it, but—I can't go off leaving Claire to be married to a damn' snake, even if I was willing to steal from men that used to trust me! Fork your broncs. We're ridin' *now* to the Tumblin' E!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE THUNDERBOLT

ALREADY it was dusk. Night had fallen before Flash could finish his preparations for the ride. The nester had to be convinced he was not mortally wounded; his wounds bandaged, and measures taken to prevent the escape of the three prisoners. Flash finally tied the bits of the horses ridden by Oregon and Mal Stone together, and fixed a lead rope to Bull's mount. This the tophand tied to his saddle horn, and then tying the hands of his prisoners in front in order that they might guide their own horses, helped them to mount.

"Ride straight an' not too fast," he ordered Oregon. "Juries are uncertain. A six-gun ain't. Think of that before yuh make a break."

"We won't start nothin'—yet," Bull answered for the three. "But don't figure we'll give yuh the deadwood on Ace, feller. He's been careless, but we gotta stick by our pardner—"

"Never asked yuh to do different," said Flash coldly. "I ain't tryin' to be slick. Only square."

He lifted his reins and the four riders moved down the canyon in a compact group. They slid the stretch of gravelled bottom without much trouble, threaded their way through the timber, down the crooked, narrow gullet of Snake Canyon, and so out upon the open sage. Two abreast they loped along for the Tumbling E. Flash rode at Bull's left hand almost close enough to reach out and touch him. Oregon and Mal Stone, on the contrary. loped along as far apart as the rope tying their bridles together, would permit. They were about fifteen feet in advance of the others; and during the entire trip there was little change in this distance, none at all in the relative formation.

Mile by mile the lights of the Tumbling E drew nearer and clearer until the party was within three miles of its destination.

"Swing left a mite or yuh'll ride into a wash," Flash called suddenly to Oregon. "Just skirt that big bunch of cattle. That'll clear it by twenty-five yards."

The four riders bunched together as Oregon drew rein. "Aw, I can see it," he begun petulantly. "We don't need—"

From the wash a Winchester cracked. Shot through the head Oregon pitched to the ground without word or cry. A spitting blaze of rifle flashes flamed along the edge of the ambush. Their staccato reports, blending in a crackling thunder as the Tumble E gunsling-

ers emptied their magazines as fast as they could pull trigger, drowned Bull's shout of rage and alarm. The lead, whistling in a storm upon the huddled horsemen, struck them down before a rein could be touched or a spur used.

Mal Stone shrieked as a bullet ripped his stomach—and the shriek died in mid note as a second bullet through the heart completed the work of the first. His horse was down, Oregon's was down. Bull, struck twice—his hoarse gasp recorded each hit—reeled out of the saddle upon Flash, his weight knocking the tophand to the ground.

Sheer instinct made the little tophand keep his grip on the reins. As he fell he jerked loose the rope which bound Bull's pony to his own, but though the terrified horse dashed away, it did not run ten feet before it went down in a storm of lead.

"I'm hit bad," Bull panted in Flash's ear. "Oh damn it, cut me loose an' gimme a gun!"

FROM the wash the rifle fire died out almost as suddenly as it had begun. The Tumbling E men had emptied their magazines simultaneously. The silence was a shock to the tophand. He couldn't understand what had happened, or how. He was on the ground with Bull on top of him. He had a six-gun in his hand, but he was dropping it to drag a knife from his pocket. He fumbled in the dark for the cords about Bull's wrists, slashing them through—and the rustler, gasping, choking from the blood that was rising in his throat from a bullet that had touched the lung, snatched the six-gun, and calling upon his vast reserve of strength, heaved himself to his feet and staggered toward the tophand's horse.

"Git him! Don't let him git away! Shoot, somebody!" The voice of Ace Collins, shrill with excitement and triumph. Following it, a scattered volley of six-guns. The sight of an escaping rustler made the cowboys in the wash toss away their empty rifles, but in the darkness the shorter barrelled weapon was not as accurate as the carbines had been. Bull drew himself to the saddle.

"Ace, the damn, dirty skunk! He double-crossed us," groaned the squat rustler. Lead was flying about him. Shouts from the wash told that Ace's cowpunchers were leaping to horseback, but nevertheless the rustler bent toward Flash still prone on the grass. "Did they get yuh, feller?" he panted. "I'm hit—too bad—to lift yuh, but—I'll wait."

"I ain't touched. Git out of here—I'll look after myself," Flash whispered. "Bull, I didn't know—"

"Know you didn't. Yo're a square fighter, not like that damn coyote," Bull panted. "I'll start for Brockman's Gap—swing to Snake Canyon—meet me—at the turn of the trail."

A cowboy rode out of the wash. The squat rustler raised the six-gun and fired, and the man fell from the saddle.

"Hope to hell it was Ace," Bull gritted, and tore away into the darkness as the wash spewed out half a dozen mounted men.

Ten seconds of rifle fire. The seconds of delay, punctuated by the booming of Colts while Bull was freed and mounted; then the thunder of hoofs charging out of the wash upon Flash. In the darkness the tophand rolled close to the body of Oregon's pony. He heard Bannister's shout; Ace's whoop-ee of triumph. He was shaking with anger; at Ace somewhat, at himself chiefly because he had bound the rustlers' hands and driven them helpless to ambush. That responsibility, more than the danger or the wreck of his hopes, had made him yield his six-gun and pony to the rustler.

Now he laid still. Hoofs thundered about him; ponies leaped over him, but

the sight of the fleeing Bull was a magnet that drew the pursuit. In Ace's eyes men on the ground, whether dead or only wounded, could be left where they were. Bull was on the roan pony, and Ace—who had seen four men—thought it was Flash fleeing into the darkness. He pushed on, rallying his men after him, to finish his gang once and for all —while Flash, gritting his teeth, watched the seven riders disappear into the darkness.

The little tophand had been protected by the bodies of his prisoners during that fusillade. He was unhurt. He rose, and walked toward the man Bull had shot. Here he got a six-gun—but a horse, which he needed far worse, was not at hand. An occasional shot from the northwest proved that somehow Bull had found strength to stay in the saddle, badly wounded as he was; that the roan was as fast as any horse ridden by the Tumbling E men.

"I hope he gets away," Flash muttered in all sincerity. Yet he doubted it. Bull was hard hit. "An' Ace—*Ace* rounds up the rustlers," the tophand groaned to himself. "In solid with old Bannister; in solid with Claire—"

FLASH stood alone and on foot in the midst of the dark prairie. He was angry, bitterly angry at the duplicity and treachery of his rival, but the tophand's rage was not the fiery, consuming fury of former days. It was a cold, bitter temper which left his head clear —He could walk to the hills and escape —He could drive off the whole Tumbling E herd if he were quick enough—Or—

Flash turned on his heel and headed for the lights of the Tumbling E. Maybe Ace had won. Maybe Ace would catch him. Maybe these strange cowpunchers Ace was leading would let the ranch buyer hang him to the nearest cottonwood, but he would go down fighting—and he would see and talk to Claire. Though she had returned his ring he would tell her what he had learned.

Cold rage drove the tophand swiftly across the three intervening miles of sage. He did not knock at the ranch house door. He threw it wide and strode across the big main room straight toward the girl. Claire leaped from her chair at his abrupt entrance. Blood from Bull's wounds had soaked the tophand's shirt. His face was white as paper save from the crimson patches of anger flaming in his cheeks and the desperation in his eyes alarmed her.

"You, Flash—here?" cried Claire. Excitement made the girl's voice clear and shrill. It rang through the house, and upstairs a bed creaked as Tonopah dragged himself from his couch. The poker faced old foreman was weak from loss of blood, but still able in this extremity, to protect the daughter of the ranch.

"I ain't hurt. This blood ain't mine," Flash answered the girl. "I was bringing the rustlers back when Ace cut down on us from a wash. He left me for dead. I walked here—to tell you."

Claire stood as she had risen. "To see—me?" she whispered. "Why?"

"I know yuh sent back my ring. Yuh wouldn't have done that if yuh'd cared for me any more. I didn't come expectin' nothin'. Only to set yuh right, I love yuh, an' your quittin' me don't let me out none."

"I don't understand," Claire whispered, but nevertheless she took a step toward Flash. "If you were with the rustlers—they'll come back an' catch yuh—ain't a pony left on the place only Thunderbolt—"

In the doorway appeared Tonopah. The six-gun in the old foreman's hand swung into line with Flash's head.

"Stick 'em high, hombre!"

Flash did not move. "It wasn't me

that shot yuh, old pardner," he answered. "The rustlers took my pony an' left me tied that night. If yuh don't believe me, shoot an' be damned!"

"Let him be. He don't mean no harm," interposed Claire. While the foreman kept his gun level, and Flash met his questioning stare eye to eye, the girl crossed to a sideboard and took out Bannister's private bottle and glass. She handed the tophand a half tumbler of neat whiskey, and stopped, an arm's length away from him, and directly in the foreman's line of fire.

"Yuh ain't goin' to be shot, Flash," she said. "Drink that, an' let by-gones be by-gones. We don't none of us hate yuh."

The whiskey spread the spot of color in the tophand's cheek and relaxed the tensity of his face and figure somewhat.

"Only yuh just think I'm a skunk," he replied. "I don't care what yuh think about me, Claire—or rather I do care like hell, but it don't matter none if yuh'll just believe what I tell yuh," he continued excitedly. "Ace Collins is a skunk, a rustler, double crossin' cold killer, an' a thief. Claire, promised me no matter what happens yuh won't have nothin' to do with him? I been with his men—"

"Now Flash, don't go on that way," Claire interrupted.

WITH consternation Flash realized she was trying to soothe him; that she disbelieved his accusation utterly.

"Yuh'll be took—" she went on.

"I come here for your sake," he snapped at her, "an' I'm goin' to show yuh the real facts whether I'm took or not! Tonopah—" Flash raised his voice and called across the girl's shoulder, "the stole cows are in a park back of the creek with the waterfall. Yuh can ride over the waterfall and find them. Ace was leadin' the rustlers an' gave them signals. He fixed up this raid tonight and dry gulched it deliberate. He killed his own pardners, Claire, an' I was drivin' them, not riding with them! Yuh'll find two of the dead hombres with their hands tied! I'd rounded them up in the hills an' was bringing them in—"

Flash stopped abruptly. For a second the room was perfectly silent while he stared at the set, strained faces of the old foreman and the girl. They were staring back at him—puzzled, anxious, but utterly incredulous.

"Yuh don't believe a word I say. But it's real facts!" said the little tophand hollowly.

"I can't. It's too mixed up," said Claire brokenly. "I'd like to. I—I sort of — loved yuh?" she paused. "Once. But yuh was so crazy tempered. an' yuh was always jealous of Ace. I 'low yuh joined the rustlers when yuh was just loco mad. Yuh'd never done it out of meanness."

"I don't hold yore shootin' me against yuh. Yuh was seein' red that night," Tonopah cut in from the doorway. "Yuh'd never have done it deliberate."

Flash drew a long sigh. "I ain't mad no more," he muttered. "This here's too big. Claire!" he cried suddenly. "Claire! Yuh ain't goin' to marry Ace right away?"

"No."

"Yuh'll make shore he's turned square an' loves yuh if yuh change your mind later?" Flash pleaded.

"I ain't thinkin' of marryin' him nohow," retorted the girl. She was emphatic and sincere, but the tophand shook his head.

"That ain't enough," he muttered. "Ace is slick. I got to show yuh what he is, an' my word ain't good no more —not even with you two." Flash was staring at the girl, but his eyes looked through and beyond her into the cloud of difficulties that surrounded him. "I'm goin'," he said slowly. "No use

talkin' when your word ain't good no more. I used to get mad over nothin'. I don't blame yuh for not believin' I'm that kind of locoed fool any more. But Claire—jest fo' old times—jest fo' the sake of the hot-headed kid yuh used to love—will yuh help me saddle Thunderbolt?"

"Flash! Yuh can't ride him—"

"I'm goin to try," asserted the tophand. "Tonight's the only chance to make Ace show himself up for the double-crossin' skunk he is, an' Thunderbolt can get me into the hills in time to do it."

CHAPTER IX

Cold Showdown

SHOULDER to shoulder Claire and Flash walked into the darkness. In silence the tophand blanketed the stallion's head and threw Tonopah's saddle across its back.

"I want to believe yuh," choked Claire as he bent to lash the latigo. "Yuh'll be throwed an' caught, Flash—"

"Don't matter," the little tophand answered. "Open the gate, Claire. Your wantin' to believe me is a lot, but it ain't enough."

Quietly Flash stroked the stallion's neck while the girl ran to throw the gate wide. He could feel the muscles stiff as iron under the silky hide. Thunderbolt was nerving himself for a struggle.

"We ain't showin' off this time, boy," Flash muttered into the laid-back ear. "Ace Collins has called us both outlaws. We got to show him we just weren't tamed. Steady, boy—this time yuh can run!"

Gently Flash led the stallion to the open gate and swung into the saddle. He could see Claire only dimly. She stood erect, and silent. He did not know her slender frame was quivering, and her lips tight shut to keep back tears.

"Goodbye, Claire. I loved yuh," he whispered—and flung the blanket from the stallion's eyes.

Thunderbolt's furious forward bound nearly jerked him from the saddle. At one leap corral and girl were left behind; the stallion gathered himself, went into the air, and came down with a stiff legged jolt that snapped back the tophand's head and forced a groan from his lips. If Thunderbolt should elect to pitch again—

Flash jabbed his spurs into the stallion's flanks. "Run, damn yuh!" he yelled.

The stallion squealed angrily. This was no scratch of a bronco buster's spurs. Flash had brought blood, and the pain made Thunderbolt bound forward with a jerk that flung his rider against the cantle. Never before had the stallion been ridden at night; never before on the open plains, or without a fence to bar his flight. After that leap the stallion began to run, belly to the ground, hoofs throwing out clods of grass, breath whistling in his nostrils.

Flash gave a shrill Yip-Yi! of triumph. He hoped Claire heard it; he hoped she knew he was flying toward the hills at a pace no other horse in the county could match. Though he had lost an hour, Ace and his cowpunchers would be delayed by the chase after Bull, and whether they had caught the wounded rustler or not, Flash believed he could get between Ace and the stolen cattle. How that would profit him he did not stop to think. There was too much exhilaration in Thunderbolt's headlong rush across the sage. Flash had no plan, except to keep his head and use to the utmost every advantage fate threw his way.

The stallion's pace never faltered as he breasted the long slope that led to

Snake Canyon. By sawing with his utmost strength Flash was able to head straight for the narrow gap, but that was all—he was unable to turn or stop, even when the flash of a Colt stabbed the darkness ahead, even when Thunderbolt's hoofs rang on the rocky floor of Snake Canyon itself, and the narrow walls re-echoed to revolver shots and the excited shouts of men who see their quarry ahead after a long chase.

Somehow Bull had found strength to keep in front. The rustler must be tearing up the canyon with Ace close behind. Flash set his teeth. Bending low in the saddle he pressed the reins against Thunderbolt's neck, and again drove home his spurs. The stallion bounded forward with a frantic burst of speed that amazed even his rider. Bound by bound he closed in upon the horses racing ahead.

SUDDENLY in the thick darkness of the canyon walls Flash was aware of men in front. He was among them. A man demanded who he was, another snatched at the reins as Thunderbolt shouldered through the slower ponies. Flash brought the barrel of his Cold down on the man's wrist; Thunderbolt squealed, and the two were abreast, and past. Whether that leader were Ace or Bannister Flash did not know. Had he been sure it was Ace he might have fired as he went by, for the last flare-up of his old temper made him see red at the thought he was within arm's length of his enemy.

Yet to kill Ace then would make Flash an outlaw indeed, and to merely wound him would be worse. Flash flattened himself to the stallion's back. Dimly above the thunder of hoofs he heard Ace roar to stop; an instant afterward a six-gun flamed and a bullet sang over his back, followed by a ragged fusillade from the revolvers of the posse. Thunderbolt was hit, but the effect of the shot was like a spur. In an instant the stallion had opened a gap of thirty feet between Flash and the weary mounts of the posse. A slight curve in the canyon walls screened him from their bullets, and later, as they tore up the slope toward the gut of the pass, Ace and his cowpunchers had no visible mark to shoot at. Though they fired steadily into the darkness ahead their lead went wide.

Flash was straining his eyes for a glimpse of Bull. As Thunderbolt's rush slackened he caught a glimpse of the roan ahead. The little tophand shouted out his own name. He did not want to be shot down by the rustler in mistake for the foremost of the pursuers, and check the stallion's speed Flash could not. His shout only merged into the shouting of the men behind. Momentarily Flash expected the shock of a bullet. He was closing in upon Bull's roan yard by yard, closed until Thunderbolt's outstretched nostrils were even with the roan's flank, and he could perceive the limp sway of Bull's broad back, still without drawing the rustler's fire.

"It's Flash—Flash! Don't shoot!" the tophand screamed.

Thunderbolt bore him abreast of the rustler. The narrowing canyon walls forced the two horses shoulder to shoulder. Bull was gripping the horn with both hands, and even so he reeled drunkenly, with his head wabbling on his breast. Nothing but the power of hate kept him in the saddle. He was dying, but nevertheless Flash's shout penetrated to his consciousness, and from somewhere the rustler drew strength to answer.

"Stop at the—gut. Fight—" he gasped.

They were in the gut of Snake Canyon when he spoke. Bull let go the horn and fell heavily to the ground. To fight

the posse off was not Flash's idea, but he was not going to abandon the other. Yet to stop Thunderbolt was not possible; instead the tophand caught the reins of the roan and flung himself off the stallion's back into the saddle of the other pony. Thunderbolt plunged forward while Flash pulled the roan to a sliding stop, and then ran back on foot, leading the pony after him.

To his utter amazement—for he had thought that the fall would kill Bull—the rustler fired down the pass as Flash reached his side. Fired—and hit. A horse screamed and must have gone down, blocking the narrow gap, for after Bull's shot a hullabaloo of thrashing horses and the shouts and oaths of excited men echoed between the walls.

Bull groaned and fired again.

"Git back hombres, git back behind the turn!" roared Ace.

"Back!" shouted Bannister.

The Tumbling E cowpunchers retreated, firing as they went. Bull's head dropped on his outstretched gun-arm.

"Was hoping they'd come on—can't last much longer," he groaned.

"I can hold them off till you come around," Flash encouraged.

THE rustler twisted his head on his arm. If he had had the strength he would have sat up. He tried and failed; yet for all his weakness a vestige of his old sullen forcefulness lingered in his voice, even though he could not speak above a whisper.

"Come around hell! I'll cash in within a couple minutes," he declared. "Wanted to live till I squared up with that damn, double crossin'—"

"Save your breath," Flash warned, but with the false strength which comes to a dying man, Bull pushed himself to a sitting posture.

"—murderin' hellion, an' be damned to my breath!" he growled. "I'm goin' down the long trail, fella, an' I ain't sorry for a thing I ever done, only leavin' that skunk alive."

"Write he was your pardner. Sign it, an' I'll square with him for yuh!" said Flash hurriedly.

The dying man snorted. "Can't write, only my name. Yuh ain't got pencil nor paper, either."

It was true.

"Be damned to evidence. Ace is too slick to catch in court," growled Bull. "Shoot him, fella! Hold me in front of yuh when they do rush, an' drill him! I'd want to have a hand in doin' it even if I'm dead. Will—yuh—promise—"

Flash had no time. Bull coughed as he uttered the last word. Blood rushed into his throat, and he dropped backward to the ground. The last competent witness of Ace's crimes had passed, and Flash, in that moment of despair, was minded to adopt the desperate expedient suggested by the dead rustler.

He could hear the Tumbling E men mustering in the canyon below. He would have been willing to die to remove Ace; what deterred him was the possibility that he might fail—might shoot the wrong man in the darkness.

No, with the death of Bull the only witness against Ace was Ace himself; only his own guilty conscience could force him to testify. Ace must have chased Bull with his heart in his mouth for fear the rustler should be captured alive; he must be wondering and worrying now over who the man who had burst through the posse mounted on the black stallion might be. Bull had spoken truly. Even dead he might help in avenging Oregon and Mal.

Flash caught at the reins of the roan and led the horse beside Bull's body. He took the lariat from the horn, and after several efforts—for the rustler's limpness and weight were almost too much for his strength—managed to lash Bull across the saddle. The reins he

wound around the horn; then quirted the roan and watched it dash noisily up the canyon.

"One of them's gettin' away!" shouted Ace in alarm.

"You're right he is!" bawled Flash in reply, and raising his voice still higher, called, "Bannister! Eli Bannister! This is Flash talkin'! Strike a light an' I'll give myself up!"

"Yuh won't gain nothin' by doin' it, yuh rustler!" shouted the ranchman angrily.

"That's as may be. I'm comin' down with my hands in the air—don't let no one shoot!" Flash called, and instantly stepped forward, making all the noise he could on the stony ground. He heard Ace whisper. He knew his enemy was urging the ranchman to shoot on sight, but he kept coming, stamping more noisily, and was rewarded by hearing the old ranchman swear in disgust.

"Be damned if I will—I want to hear what he has to say," Bannister growled aloud; and stepping in front of his hired punchers, the ranchman struck a match.

"THAT was Bull Mendoza got away. Mebbe yuh heard his horse. He's safe in the woods by this time," Flash lied, "goin' to the place we left the cattle. You remember Mendoza, Bannister? The hombre that the Cattle Association called my pardner?"

"Yeah," interjected the ranchman.

"He's been my pardner two days. Before that he had another—a dirty skunk that double-crossed him. Bull's dyin', but before he cashes in he wants to get square with that jasper—an' so do I!"

Ace Collins shouldered his way to the ranchman's side. "Flash is lyin', an' lyin' clumsy at that," he sneered. "Tie him up an' let's get after this Mendoza feller—"

"In the dark? Ain't a chance to git him without we knowed just where he's holed up," Bannister snapped.

"Ill take yuh there," said Flash. "Bull is waitin' to confess complete. He wants to git square with his chief."

"Mebbe yuh'll give this chief a name?" Ace sneered.

"Not me. I'm lettin' Bull do that," said the tophand quietly. "All the Tumblin' E cows are safe, Bannister, an' if yuh got anything else against me — such as shootin' at Tonopah by mistake —*I'm ready to stand trial after yuh've listened to Bull Mendoza.* He's shot two-three times. Let's git goin'."

"Why didn't he wait where he was?" sneered Ace.

"Because accidents can easy happen in the dark," Flash retorted. "He's waiting for me to bring yuh to a cabin where there's a light. Why—where yuh goin' Ace?"

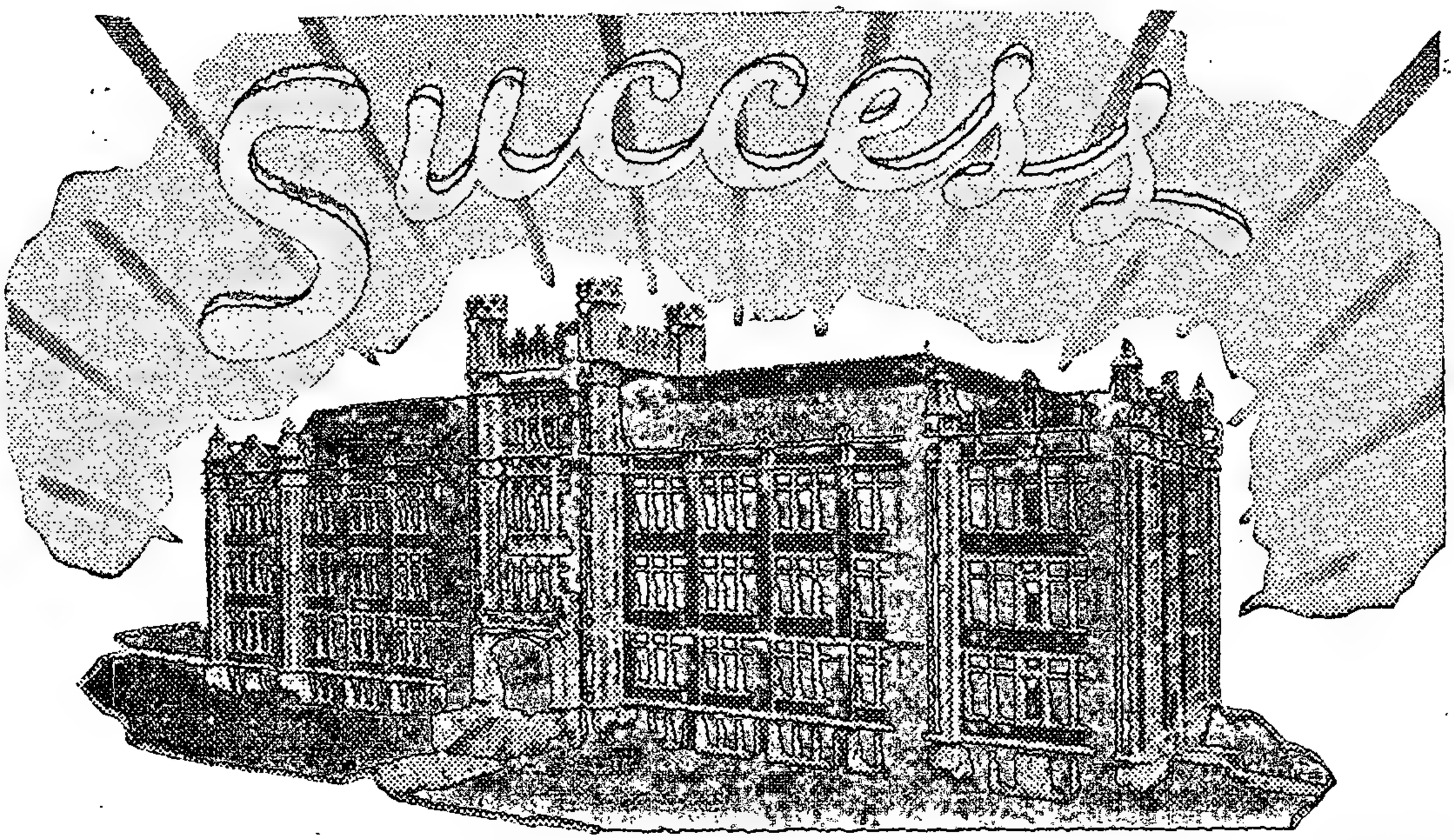
"Scoutin' after this Bull feller without no crooked rustler like you fer a guide," rasped the hawknosed man, and swinging himself to the saddle, he started at a gallop up the canyon.

"ACE shore is in a sweat tonight," Bannister rumbled in his deliberate manner. "Yo're tellin' a kind of scaly story, Flash," he went on slowly, "but I reckon we'll follow yuh, bein' as we're six to one, or five rather countin' the feller whose pony was killed."

"Foller hell—you've got to hightail it!" Flash snapped with an excitement entirely in contrast to his coolness during his confession. "Bannister, would any one know where those cows are except one of the rustlers? Has Ace ever told yuh?"

"Course not!" the ranchman snorted.

"Then if we find Ace in the park where they are that will show he's in with the rustlers, won't it?" snapped the tophand. "He's the boss rustler—an' we're shore going to find him there if we ride fast. There's another way out, so he won't be there no longer than



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it will take him to go to that cabin where Bull is waitin', an' kill him before he can confess to us! Let's go!"

They made the trip to the gravelled stream bed practically standing in their stirrups.

Bannister was making considerable noise in his progress up the canyon, and as Flash approached the cabin from that direction he saw Ace dart out of the brush and make for his pony.

"Bluffed — bluffed, yuh polecat!" shouted the tophand. "It's Flash — shuck your gun!"

The answer was a shot that whined by the tophand's ear. Coolly, deliberately, he fired at the flash of Ace's revolver and leaped aside. Dimly he saw Ace topple, firing twice as he fell, and again sent a bullet beneath the stabbing flame of Ace's Colt. That ended it. Ace remained crumpled on the ground where he had fallen, and Bannister and the cowpunchers were crowded around Flash before the tophand had time to examine his enemy's body.

BANNISTER struck a match and cried out in amazement. He came striding back followed by four furious, swearing cowpunchers, and seized Flash roughly by the shoulders.

"Know who yuh shot?" he grated.

"Yep," said Flash dully. "Ace Collins—the boss rustler. Else he wouldn't never have been here. Yuh can swing me off a limb now if yuh like, Bannister—or yuh can wait till morning. I'll show yuh two men that yuh shot from the wash lying with their hands tied; I'll show yuh the feller that was going to confess dead, an' tied to a pony somewhere in the bush—but I'll be damned if I'm goin' to lie or explain no more. I've saved yuh your cattle, and kept Claire from fallin' in love with a mean tricky coyote. Yuh can take it, or leave it. I'm done!"

Flash closed his mouth firmly. He was done, and he did not believe slow thinking old Bannister would ever get the tangled facts of the case straight. Yet in that tense moment it was the ranchman's very deliberation which saved the tophand's life. The cowpunchers were all for hanging the man who had killed their employer, but Bannister bellowed them into silence.

"Ace never got here by accident!" he roared. "We'll wait till morning!"

And in the morning every fact corroborated Flash's strange story, until at last Bannister reached out in his deliberate way and shook him by the hand. The party had reached the Tumbling E when that act of reconciliation was made. Claire had waited in the doorway, pale from a sleepless night, her eyes grave.

"Listen what Flash has done!" roared out old Bannister.

"He—he's back. That's all I care about," said Claire. "Will yuh go into the house, Flash—alone."

The tophand swung off his pony. As he pushed past Claire she closed the door behind him and walked straight into his arms.

"Yuh come back last night for me, saying yuh loved me when there wasn't anything but your love between us, Flash," she whispered. "Before I find out what yuh done I want to tell yuh what was in that letter."

Flash saw the blush rise rosily in the back of Claire's neck. Her face was pressed so firmly against his shoulder that he could not raise her head.

"I wrote, 'I'm sending back your ring because you're so hot tempered,'" Claire quoted. Her voice was muffled against the tophand's shirt. "'But no matter what you do I'm going to love you always.'" She raised her head. "I mean it. I do!" she ended.

"But it's all right, honey; I've shown I'm square an' I ain't hot tempered no more!" exulted Flash as he kissed her.

Fighting Ranger

by EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Bushwacked!—they grabbed the wrong end of a hot poker when they threw bullets at this fighting Texan.

Nevah forked a bronc'
  When I could hire a hack;
Nevah packed a Colt
  With the triggah tied back;
Nevah could shoot with
  More'n one hand;
Nevah hit the barn with
  A gun I fanned.

Nevah could—

SHELLEY RAINES' brand new "Nevah-Nevah" song was checked abruptly by the not too distant *whang* of a rifle and the smack of a bullet which drove one of the sticks of his campfire into the air. Before he could move from where he squatted beside the fire—an impulse that came to him instantaneously—there was a second *whang* from the moonless dark. This time the bullet rang upon Shelley's tin cup, knocking it from his hand, leaving him with stinging fingers, knees scalded by hot coffee, and mixed anger and bewilderment.

"Leav-in'!" remarked Shelley, with deep sincerity, and then fitted action to the word with a headlong dive.

He crawled rapidly away from the

dangerously revealing firelight, noting that the fire was not being methodically shot to pieces. Safely out of the line of fire, he squatted down to stare grimly in the direction from which the bullets had come.

"An' my carbine in the saddle scabbard, right on top the dam' fire—o' course!" he grunted.

Tentatively he drew his ten-inch-barreled Colt, spun it thoughtfully upon a forefinger, then shook his head and shoved the six-shooter back into the holster. Then from the darkness behind him Rojo, the big, red horse, snorted where he grazed at the end of Shelley's lariat. At the sound Shelley grinned, tight lipped. He came to his feet with a tigerish straightening of long body. It was the work of a moment to get the rope and build a small loop; to slip to the edge of the firelight and send the loop in a deft underhand cast that snared the saddlehorn. As he hauled in the slack and the saddle shot toward him the firing—which had ceased for a moment—burst out again furiously. This time it came from two sides.

He skipped hastily back, dragging the saddle. At a safe distance again, he jerked his Winchester from the scabbard and sent a couple of his .44s in the general direction of each bushwhacker. Thereafter he saddled hastily and swung up.

"Big Boy," he addressed Rojo earnestly, "here's where the JM's handsomest an' onliest cow-detective shore takes un-to hisself scenery! Me'n you, Rojo, we're goin' up the road a piece!"

SLOWLY, softly, at first; then at a mile-eating foxtrot, he pushed the red horse north and west, into the Territory. He heard the intermittent rattle of the rifles faint behind him; grinned cheerfully at the sound and was inspired to take up the "Nevah-Nevah" song again, in the soft, almost whispering, baritone that was as familiar on the Southern border as his eight-year record in the Rangers:

Nevah could stack up
  Quick on the draw;
Nevah could stick on
  Evah' outlaw;
Nevah could claim I
  Nevah was skeered;
Nevah was a he-ro . . .
  As evah I heerd.
Nevah went out a-projek—
  In' foh dangah;
Nevah was nothin' but
  A Texas Rangah!

Characteristically, he was moving straight into the Territory, in precisely the direction which he would have taken the next morning had no compulsion moved him. Shelley Raines was a good deal of a bulldog. It was hard to sidetrack him from the trail it was his business to follow, and just now his trail led into this wildest of wild commonwealths, the Territory. His trail would end only with the double discovery of the parties who had mysteriously and feloniously abstracted three hundred-odd head of lawfully branded JM cows, and the party or parties who held them now. Even though he was no longer a Ranger sergeant, but figured merely as one of the JM hands, Shelley could not forget old ways. Which was, perhaps, the reason Jim Manning had sent him on this scouting expedition.

He sensed that Rojo had stumbled upon some sort of trail through the thick brush, for the red horse was moving steadily, surely, ahead, despite the pitchy darkness. Near midnight he turned Rojo off this trail a little way and made camp in the woods. But this time he lit no fire, nor did he sing as he rolled up in his blankets.

"Now, how-come them hairpins to

crack down on me?" he puzzled, just before he fell asleep. "Couldn't have been my singin'. They wasn't close enough for that to worry 'em," he chuckled whimsically. "An' they'd shore've had to follow me a long ways to even figger that Jim Mannin' knowed me, much less sent me over here a-hunt-in' his stuff. Well—I dunno!"

He was up in the gray hour before dawn, and since both food and camp-gear had been abandoned the night be-fore, there was nothing to do but saddle and go hunt breakfast—if breakfast there was to be.

He swung up, a rangy, yellow haired six-footer with wide, whimsical mouth, the aggressive nose of the man of action and steel-gray eyes that shone in his bronzed face almost like silver conchas against a well-weathered saddle. He wore the usual Stetson, flannel shirt, overalls and high-heeled boots of the puncher. But a gaudily embroidered buckskin jacket gave an unusual touch to his costume; the jacket being me-mento of his year down in the Frio Country, a couple of years before, and one of Shelley's prized possessions.

WHEN Rojo came through the dense brush back to the little trail that he had found the night before, Shelley reined him in abruptly, to stare down at the soft dirt of the trail floor. He made out three distinct sets of hoof-prints, ten to fifteen hours old, at most. The horses had been moving fast in the direction from which he had come. Be-cause of his course into the Territory he was back-tracking these riders. He let Rojo foxtrot while he watched the track. Presently, he pulled up again. This time he swung down to squat thoughtfully. Without turning his eyes from the prints, he fumbled for Durham and papers, built a cigarette and lit it absently.

Here the trio of tracks had halted. Also there were boot-prints among the impressions of horses' hoofs, and one queer set of prints.

"Yes, sir, a woman!" Shelley breathed. "Well, I shore will be damned!"

For there was no doubt in his mind that these three riders were responsible for the rifle shots of the night before. These people had been carrying rifles ready in their hands; he could see the imprints of the butts beside their foot-prints. This trail led almost directly to his old camp; and it was giving too much weight to coincidence, he thought, to believe that still another party had been in the neighborhood of his fire, had stumbled upon him and started shoot-ing.

He placed his own capable boot be-side the tiny print. It was somewhat small, he thought, even for a woman's. He straightened, pushing back the Stetson upon rumpled yellow hair, to grin reminiscently.

"Well, sir, Jim Mannin', he told me this-here Territory was a hell of a place," he chuckled. "But did I look upon Jim as a bubblin' over fountain o' wisdom; No sir, I never done no such thing! Me, o' course, I figgered that after eight year in the Rangers a li'l bunch o' scenery like this couldn't show me nothin'!"

He mounted and rode on. Soon the trail turned into a road—a real road, with wheeltracks. Shelley nodded his satisfaction:

"This-here'll be the stage-road from La Cruz to Marsden. *'Sta bueno!* Means we eat after a while—if we don't git our heads shot off first. Never ex-pected to hit her this far north. Hmm! Lady an' her friends, they was shore a-hightailin' it along here—an' be damned if that's Spanish, either! Well, Marsden can't be so far, now. I could eat most anythin'—an' the Durham's goin', too."

For perhaps ten miles he followed the stage-road, riding in the track which the stage had made the day before going in this same direction. At last he reined in with a quick nod, having come to what he had been vaguely expecting to find, if without knowledge of just what form the discovery would take.

It was where the road ascended a sharp grade, which was made easier at the crest by a cut-bank. Here, where any vehicle must slow down as it climbed, the stage had stopped. It needed hardly more than a glance to see that there had been a holdup. Here the trail of "the lady and her friends," as Shelley termed them, ended—and began again. He found the prints of many feet, so many that at first he stared bewildered, wondering how any stage could have carried so many passengers. Then, suddenly, he understood: there had been investigators of the robbery here. He moved with a sort of expertness over the trampled ground.

HE HAD fairly well pieced together the details of the hold-up from the multitude of tracks in the soft earth, when a great smudge, the hollow imprint of a limp body, caught his eye from the edge of the road. He moved across and stared long at the blood-soaked ground.

"Well, sir! Somebody shore got it!" he grunted. "Looks sort o' like the lady an' her friends pulled the stick-up, too!"

He began to move in circles and presently found that his conviction was well-founded. On the crest of the ridge, shielded by bushes, was the spot where the trio had waited for some time, if the dozen-odd cigarette stubs he found were any evidence. At last he shrugged and swung up again, to turn Rojo north once more.

"Lady an' her friends waited in the brush till the stage come along, then stuck her up," he mulled over the robbery as he went. "Shot somebody—fool-driver, most likely, though mebbe 'twas a passenger. Then they rattled their hocks for the Big Woods. Saw my fire, an' havin' guilty consciences, they figgered I was somethin' I ain't an' started in to abolish me. Well, Marsden ought to be pretty close now. I'll git all the horrible details there. Not—" he added as an afterthought—"that it's any o' my business."

He saw Marsden from a ridge, long before he reached it. It was a typical Southwestern town, a huddle of adobe buildings lining both sides of the road, with cottonwoods and poplars growing everywhere about the houses. There were signs of unusual activity; by twos and three a good many riders were coming into the road ahead of him, going toward the town.

There was an atmosphere of tenseness about the slim line of buildings when Shelley rode in. Men collected upon the verandas of stores and saloons and talked excitedly, yet nobody seemed to be doing anything. Shelley reined in before a saloon where one of the knots of talkers gathered. They eyed him with veiled curiosity, and he fancied that the J-Bar brand on Rojo puzzled them. It was a long way to the old J-Bar in East Texas, and he thought that none here would be likely to recognize the iron.

"I'm a-lookin'," he told them solemnly, "for the worst dad-burned place in town to eat. I want to know whereabouts she is, so's I can go somewheres else."

Steadily they eyed him, with no lightening of their suspicious, narrow-lidded regard. Shelley let his eyes travel calmly over them. There were seven or eight in the foreground; men of the ranges all, brown-faced, level-eyed men, in battered, dusty Stetsons, flannel and jean shirts, overalls and rough woollen

trousers jammed hit-or-miss into high-heeled boots. At the waists of most of them hung the favorite weapon of the frontier—Mr. Colt's famous long-barreled six-shooter, caliber .45.

NOW, into the door of the saloon behind them, came a short, wide shouldered man, a bow-legged, middle aged man with twinkling, slate-gray eyes set well apart in a fire-red face. Upon his buttonless vest was a sheriff's star. He looked over the heads of the others to the big, calm figure on the tall red horse, then came pushing through, his gash-thin mouth clamped shut.

"Don't know whether you can eat around yere or not!" grunted the sheriff, after a long, hard look at Shelley. "Whar 'bouts yuh from? What yuh doin' with that-'ere hawss, anyhow?"

"Why, I just drifted in from over where the wind comes from," Shelley replied gravely. "An' if the hawss is botherin' yuh, why— Hell! Yuh shore would have a hell of a time on a hawss-ranch, now wouldn't yuh? First time the remuda come yo' way, yuh'd be fit to be tied. But they ain't no mystery tied to Rojo's tail—no real mystery. I found him a-sittin' on a tombstone, y'ars and y'ars ago. This was up in the Nation, yuh see, where they don't have no tombstones an', anyway yuh figger it, that makes it all the stranger."

He favored the sheriff with a level, steady stare that produced no visible effect in the fire-red face.

"They's a Chink joint down the road," one of the listening cowboys volunteered suddenly. He had been one of those to grin covertly at the grim-faced peace officer. "Even if ye air as hard a case as the shuriff 'lows, I reckon ye can eat."

"Stranger," grinned Shelley, "yuh say yuh reckon I can eat. Hell, I know I can! When that Chink gits through packin' grub to me, he'll lean back an' all the air around him'll look like a laundry-ticket. What he'll be sayin' is, 'Shades o' my honorable ancestors, I done fed a crowd!' "

Presently, to where Shelley sat before fried steaks and soggy potatoes and flapjacks, the sheriff came along. He sat down at the counter beside Shelley with an arm upon its greasy edge and regarded the eater thoughtfully.

"Shelley, yuh ain't gone an' left the Rangers?" he asked hopefully.

"Shore have, Arch," Shelley assured him, around a mouthful of steak. "Yuh see, it was just one dam' thing trailin' another. No chance for a commission with them blackwaxy farmer-legislators a-shavin' the frontier defense appropriation. All the cap'ns an' lieutenants was a-holdin' onto their jobs like a dude to his saddle-horn. I quit eighteen months ago. Cap'n o' guards for the Santa Fe for awhile. Then I was deputy city marshal at El Paso till I got corns on my hands totin' a sawed-off Greener. I shore made a record there! Five months deputy marshal an' never killed nobody! How's ever'thing?"

"Turrible!" Arch Holmes replied simply. "Plumb turrible! Shelley, I shore got a job for yuh, if yu'll take her. Chief dep'ty. Now, listen! Hangin' the deadwood onto the Curley Ike gang o' murderin' rustlers wasn't nothin'—not nothin'—alongside the trouble I got now. Yuh done that trick for me like 'twas a b c. But this-yere job's a tail-twister."

"Sorry!" grinned Shelley. "I'd shore like to help yuh drop a loop over the lady an' her friends, but I'm a workin' man a'ready."

"How'd yuh know?" cried Holmes. "Know it was a woman?"

"She took a couple shots at me last night." He explained his hurried departure from camp the night before and added his deductions at the scene of the robbery.

THE sheriff nodded gloomily.

"Yuh noticed, I reckon, that there wasn't no trail o' ours with the gang's. Reason was, this is the fourth time the stage has been stuck up. Before this, we always went hellin' right after the gang. Always lost the trail pretty close to whar yuh was camped last night. So this time we cut across to try to make the rocky ground ahead o' the gang. Never done it, so we stopped at the Bar W an' come in 'fore daylight this mawnin'. Shelley, yuh got to gi' me a hand!"

"Sorry!" Shelley shrugged again. "But I'm on JM business, an' mighty important business, at that. Who was shot?" he demanded suddenly.

"Dunno. That is, I dunno who he was. Nobody knows him. Fattish fella that was ridin' the stage. He got out with the other passengers. Lined up an' the stick-up gang, all wearin' bandannas, come along the line. One o' the passengers says this fella was on the end o' the line an' when this woman that leads the gang got to him, she sort o' grunted. Took his stuff an' looked at it. Then she up with her six-shooter an' just shot him full o' holes! He was knocked down by the first bullet an' she just emptied her right-hand gun into him there on the ground, then rode her hawss over him! By George, Shelley! Some o' them passengers was downright hard cases, an' it made them sick!"

"The she-devil!" gritted Shelley. "The dam' she-devil!" He was not, by a good many quarts, a stranger to the sight of blood—his own or that of others. But the sheriff's account infuriated him.

"Come on up to the office," the sheriff invited him, apparently pleased at his show of emotion. "Not with me—I don't want the town knowin' I know yuh, yet. This fella's laid out in my back room an' they ain't nobody there. I'll be along after while. Go in the back door. My place is the other side the Grizzly Bear Saloon."

WHEN the sheriff came through his office into the back room, he found Shelley standing over the dead man. Shelley's brown face was very, very grim and his steely eyes were more than ever like silver conchas against a weathered saddle.

"Arch," he said quietly, "I reckon the JM's goin' to git along without me until we decorate the cottonwoods a little. At least, it'll git along without me or go to hell! This is Bill Heffner, an' him an' me was four year in the Rangers together. He was the Ranger went across the river with me, three years back, time I went after them Valdez murderers. He shot Gato Valdez right off'n my back, Bill did, an' that's why I never stayed in Mexico permanent. I'm yo' deputy, Arch!"

"Good enough!" the sheriff cried. "Now, yere's ever'thing I know. They's been four robberies at different places along the road. Every time the trail peters out in them rocks southeast o' here. The gang shore knows the country. It's my belief they're livin' around yere real close. Chances are, ever'body but the woman's in town right now. But who they are—I dunno!"

"She knew Bill Heffner. She knew Bill. Now, how does that hook up? He never was no woman's man. Always fought shy o' women. But she knew him an' hated him enough to kill him."

Shelley was squatted in a corner, now, talking to himself as he smoked. His eyes were half closed as he pondered the mystery. Why had this strange, ferocious woman killed poor Bill Heffner? If he knew that, Shelley thought, he would be farther toward identifying, finding, her.

"I'm goin' to wander around an' study about it, Arch," he told the sher-

iff. "Let's don't publish nothin' about me hornin' in on this; mebbe I'll pick up more thataway. An' don't expect me to come reportin' nothin' to yuh. I'm goin' to pin the deadwood onto this gang if it's possible, an' I got to work my own way. Lone wolfin' it's the only way I ever could do anything."

He could not rid himself of the idea that in Bill Heffner's murder lay the clue to the woman's identity, but how to clear up that mystery he hardly saw. In the saloons he met many of the residents of the country, hard cases, many of them; just ordinary ranchers and cowboys, many others. From the first he had sly, curious glances, from the second half hostile, utterly suspicious looks. He gathered that his apparent argument with the sheriff had been published efficiently.

There was no telegraph station in Marsden, but in Rountree, fifteen miles away, where the stage road met the railway, he could send a telegram. So much he gathered in a brief encounter with the sheriff, who was interviewing many of the more prominent citizens concerning ways and means of finally stopping the stage robberies. Shelley mounted Rojo and rode the fifteen miles to Rountree.

IT WAS hardly more than a flag station and the operator was an Eastern youth, a health seeker. Shelley sized him up quickly and decided that he was to be trusted.

"Stranger," he smiled, "I got a message to send an' it's just mebbe possible that somebody'll come along askin' about it. What'll yuh do in a case like that?"

"Why, I'd keep a copy, Mr. Raines. In fact, I'd keep two copies. One of the message you send and one—just a copy. I'd show 'em the one they ought to see."

"How-come yuh know me?" Shelley was eyeing him sidelong.

"Why, I was in El Paso when you were deputy marshal. I was in the Acme the night you disarmed the two 'bad men from Bitter Creek.' I thought you were going to cut 'em in two, for a minute."

"I see," nodded Shelley. "Well, friend, this is a mighty private message I want to send, so if yuh'll fix up a copy to show anybody that comes snoopin' around, I shore will appreciate it. Make it to—oh, to Hank Sanders in Fort Quitman, an' ask him if he's goin' prospectin' soon. Anything, yuh know. But send this-here one to Bob Arnold in Socorro.

"Is Bill Heffner still workin' for yuh? Has he got married? Do yuh know anything about him monkeyin' with any women? Wire me quick all yuh know. Send message to S. Smith. Don't use Heffner's name."

He rode back to Marsden with the operator's promise that he would send the reply over by a trustworthy Mexican boy. For the rest of the late afternoon and evening he drifted from store-veranda to saloon, and in the Grizzly Bear he found a guitar and sat down in a corner. The cowboys watched him with interest.

"Last fella played that"—thus the bartender solemnly—"he thought he was right good. But he must've been plumb wrong. Anyhow, somebody busted out cryin' an' somebody else shot him."

Shelley grinned amiably and favored them with "Nevah-Nevah." They howled for more and so in his lilting, whispering baritone he made melody of the crude lines of "Sam Bass." Shelley had been in Reynolds' E Company at Round Rock, and had run upon Bass as the outlaw lay dying outside the town.

"One to old Sam—an' Frank Jackson—an' Sebe Barnes!" cried a devil-may-

care voice from the bar. "An' damnation to Jim Murphy!"

Shelley lifted his eyes to the speaker. He knew the enthusiasm of the cowboy gang, but this slim, black-haired, black-eyed figure seemed unusually enthusiastic. Something of a dandy, he was, with fine blue shirt and silken neckerchief, a white-handled Colt in his holster and silver-trimmed spurs.

"This is one on me! Line up, ever'body!" the cowboy was yelling.

Shelley joined the others, to keep from being conspicuous. He listened half-amusedly to the slender youngster's excited praise of Bass, who became a heroic figure as the cowboy embroidered the gang's exploits.

"He licked them Texas Rangers to a frazzle!" cried the youngster. "Yes, sir! They always brag about how big they are, but Sam shore showed 'em up for the fourflushers they are. He—"

"Was yuh there—yo'self?" Shelley's amused, tolerant drawl cut through the barroom noises.

"I—" The youngster seemed taken aback by the question. Then he flushed. "Mebbe I wasn't, but I know all about it. He shore made them four-flushin' Rangers look like ring-tailed monkeys."

"Son," drawled Shelley, "yuh ought to git yo' information first-hand. Keeps yuh from passin' out stuff yuh can't g'arantee. Yes, sir, shore does. Yuh see, Sam, he never met up with the Rangers—the real Rangers—till Dick Ware filled him an' Sebe Barnes full o' lead in Round Rock. All he'd ever seen before then was just June Peak an' his gang o' farmer-boys. They was *called* Rangers, but sho! They's them as calls a burro a saddle-animal!"

FURIOUSLY, the youngster glared at the big, calm figure. Shelley held his whisky-glass in his left hand; his right was close to the black butt of his long Colt.

"Yuh must've been in the Rangers, to be a-takin' up for 'em so loud!" snarled the boy.

"Son, the Rangers don't need me to take up for 'em. I never seen a bunch as needed less outside help. Yuh don't have to be in the Rangers to know about 'em, either. Have yuh ever had one after yuh?"

The barroom roared, taking it for granted that Shelley's experience with the famous force had been of the sort implied—which was what he intended. He was already regretting having drawn attention to himself, but there was that about this youngster which he found irritating. He liked the two hard-featured older men with him as little.

He withdrew to his corner again and kept watch upon the trio. All were drinking heavily, and from time to time the black-eyed cowboy turned to eye Shelley malevolently. The three moved from the bar to watch a monte game, near midnight, and Shelley kept mechanical guard against any overt action. The two older men had the bowed legs and the awkward gait of the puncher, but the boy's gait was a queer hobble that seemed the more odd in that Shelley could see no signs of any deformity about him.

Over the heads of the men at the monte game now appeared the face of the sheriff. He lifted his brows a trifle as he met Shelley's eyes and shrugged. Into the barroom slipped a small Mexican boy. He looked quickly, alertly, about, like some small wild animal. At Shelley he stared for a full minute, then came slipping over to him, to squat and stare at the guitar. Shelley drew out his Durham and dropped the sack. The boy picked it up and with smile and bow, returned it. Shelley unfolded the telegram in shelter of the guitar and read it twice, very carefully. Then for minutes he sat with narrowed eyes.

Sheriff Arch Holmes came over and

squatted almost beside Shelley. With eyes trained upon the bar and speaking out of the corner of his mouth, he warned Shelley against the trio near the monte game.

"That's 'Frenchy' Denton an' his two punchers. They got a little place south o' here. Bad actors. Been around here last six-seven months. Watch 'em!"

Shelley nodded and rose with that tigerish flexing of long muscles which marked him. He set down the guitar and strolled over to the monte game. Frenchy did not see him approach and Shelley, walking directly in front of him, trod emphatically upon his toes, then turned and grinned at him.

"Dam' yuh, don't yuh be trompin' on my feet!" snarled Frenchy.

"Ah, it never hurt yuh none!" retorted Shelley. "Never tromped on yo' toes. Just stepped on them rags yuh got stuck in yo' boot-toes!"

FRENCHY'S dark face went white. For an instant he stared glassily at Shelley; then with an inarticulate sound, half-grunt, half-snarl, he went for the white-handled Colt. But Shelley's hand flashed up and the long barrel of his gun cracked Frenchy across the forehead just above the eyes; jerked back a trifle and snapped against his temple. Shelley had gone into this knowing exactly what he would do. So he had the advantage of Frenchy's two punchers.

A quick half-step forward and he rammed the Colt-muzzle into the stomach of the nearest one. The man's gun was out, but he died before he could lift it. The second puncher was tugging at his Colt butt when Shelley seized his wrist and held it motionless.

"Do yuh *want* to git killed?" snarled Shelley.

"What—what—what's the idee, Shelley?" cried the sheriff, leaping forward.

"Here's yo' stage-robbers," Shelley informed him grimly. "Yuh been lookin' for a woman. So was I. Well, there 'she' is on the floor. Yank his boots off. He's got 'em stuffed with rags. They're regular size, yuh see, an' so his little feet never attracted no attention."

He spun the half-dazed puncher whom he still held about, to face the sheriff.

"Spill it!" he snarled. "Spill it, or, by God! I'll send yuh after yo' partner there!"

"Frenchy was boss," the man admitted fearfully. "Me an' Ab, there, we helped him. We'd ride down over the rocky ground an' stick up the stage. Somebody in the office'd tell Frenchy when it was worth robbin'. Then we'd hightail it fer the rocky ground south o' here an' then go back to the ranch. Later on we'd come into town an', mebbe, ride with the posse. All the stuff from the robbery yeste'day is hid under the floor o' the old bunkhouse at the ranch."

"How'd yuh figger it?" the sheriff asked Shelley, bewilderedly. "All in one day!"

Shelley handed over the telegram.

"I knew that whoever killed Bill Heffner done it for a reason. Course, I never figgered thing'd fit together as nice as they done tonight. Read it out loud. It's from Bob Arnold in Socorro. I knew Bill had worked for Bob, so I wired him to ask him if he knew anything about a woman that'd hate Bill Heffner so bad she'd kill him on sight. Tha twas the only trail I saw, then. After that Mex' boy slipped me the telegram I saw lots o' things. But read it out loud, Arch!"

SLOWLY, while the crowd gaped half-comprehendingly, the sheriff read:

" 'He ain't working for me no more but is deputy sheriff. Ain't married and you know blame well he's scared to

death of women. Left last week for Marsden with warrant for Rafael Max Williams wanted for two murders done in this county last year. Sheriff heard Williams living close to Marsden. Help our friend take Williams if possible. Williams about twenty-four, slim, dark-complected, black hair and eyes and scar left side neck. Got smallest feet you ever saw on man. Dangerous gunman. Arnold.' "

"Yuh see, Heffner was from Socorro," Shelley explained. "Born and raised there. So Williams—yo' Frenchy there—he knew him by sight. When he lifted Bill's papers an' saw that warrant—well, I reckon he just went wild. An' he was naturally a killer! Funny! Here he kills pore old Bill Heffner to keep from bein' found out, an' because he killed him he git found out!"

Shelley turned to the still bewildered sheriff.

"Arch, yuh'll shore hang that devil? I can trust yuh, now?" he asked.

Before the sheriff could reply there came an onimous snarl of promise from the grim-faced men in the barroom.

"Stranger! Friend! He's good as hung right now!" A wizened little cowman grinned wolfishly.

"All right, then," grinned Shelley. "I'll leave him to yuh-all. Me, well, I'm goin' to hightail it. I got a little cowology to study up north o' here."

"Well, yuh don't git away till I tell these folks yere a few!" cried the indignant sheriff. "Folks, this-yere's—"

"S. Smith, at yo' service!" cried Shelley, with a ferocious glare at Arch Holmes. Suddenly his lean, brown face registered abrupt recollection of an important task left undone.

" 'Scuse me a little, folks!" he cried. "I just thought o' somethin'!"

He vanished through the door, ran awkwardly swift on high heels around the building and crossed the street to the livery corral. He flipped the Mex' hostler a silver dollar, saddled Rojo flashingly and swung up. He was three hundred yards down the road when the sheriff and some others came to the door of the Grizzly Bear, looking for him.

"That son-of-a-gun!" roared the sheriff. "Look at him! He was skeered he was goin' to be thanked! The son-of-a-gun! That's just the way he allus is. Listen!"

Faintly to them came the whispering lilt of Shelley's baritone, that blended with the hoofbeats of the big, red horse scuffing in the soft dust:

Nevah went out a-projeck—
In' foh dangah;
Nevah was nothin' but
A Texas Rangah!

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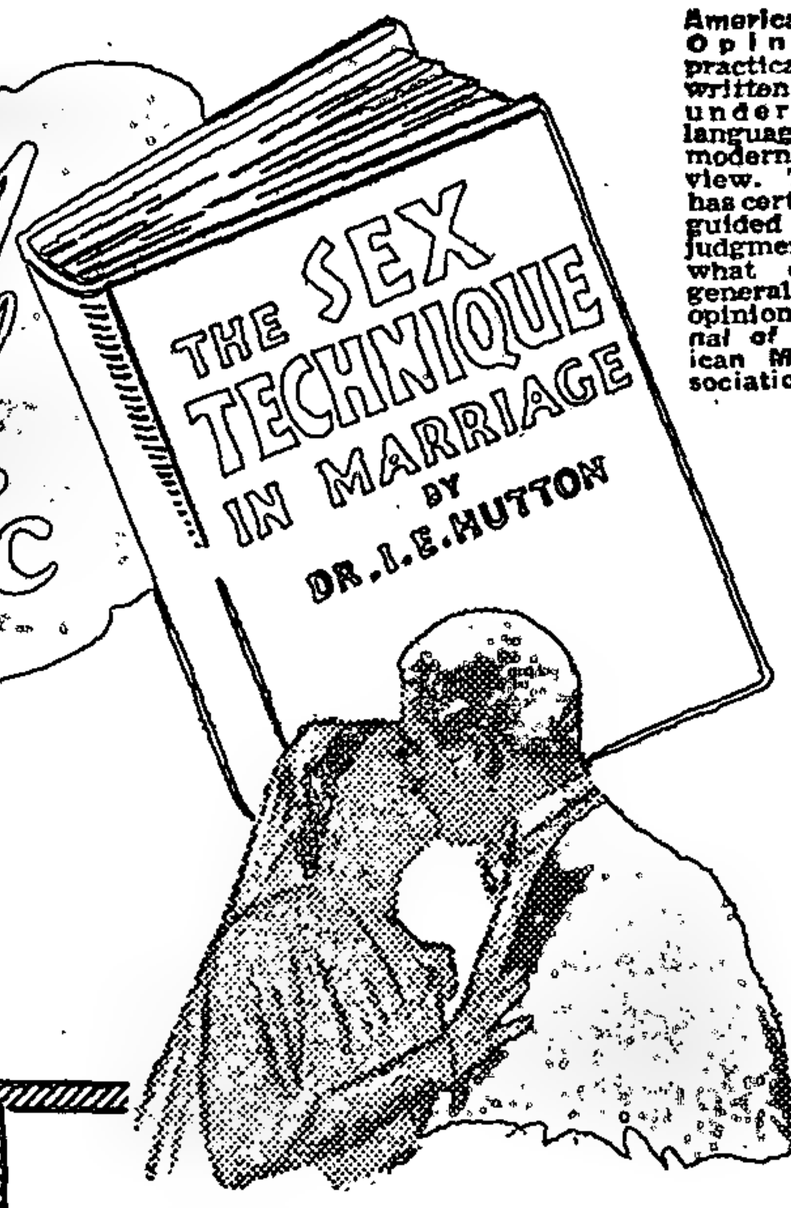

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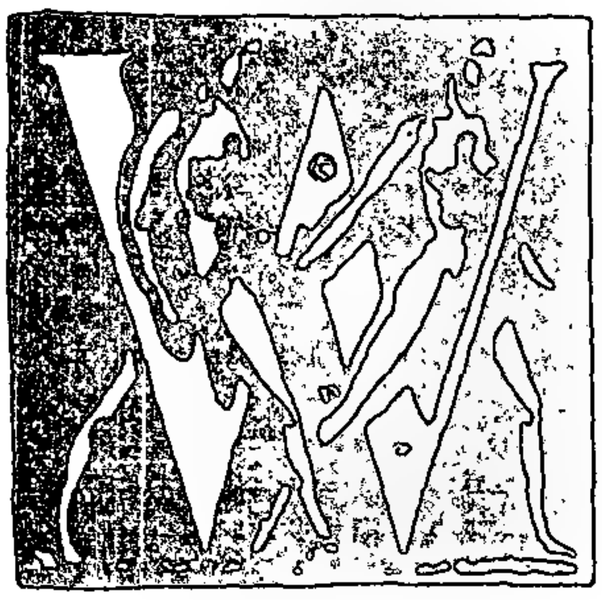

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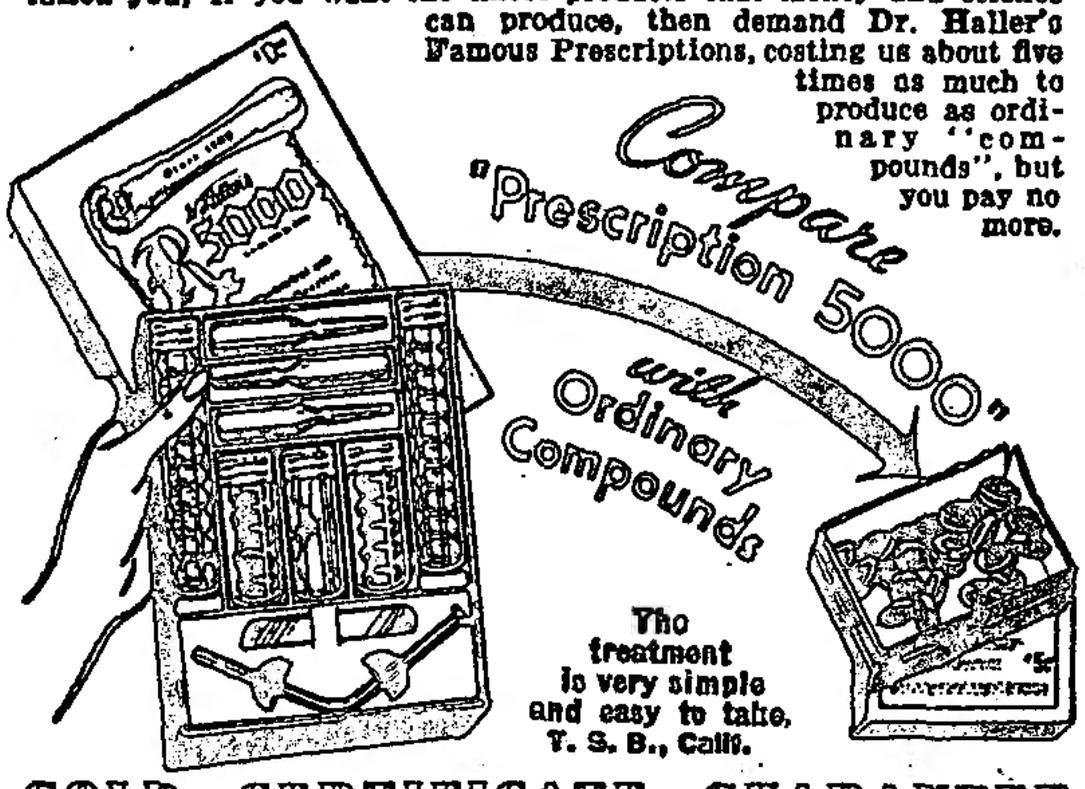

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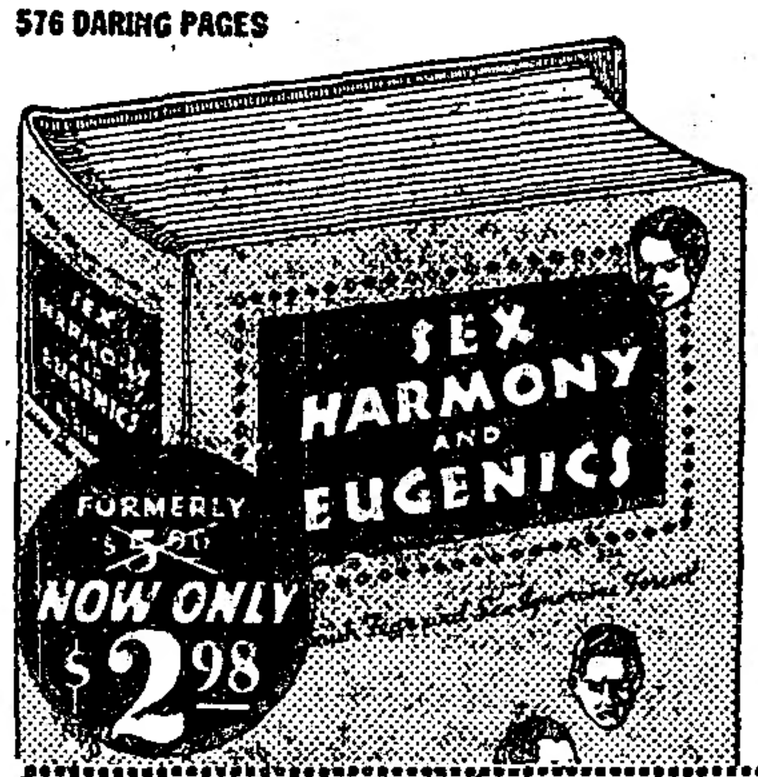

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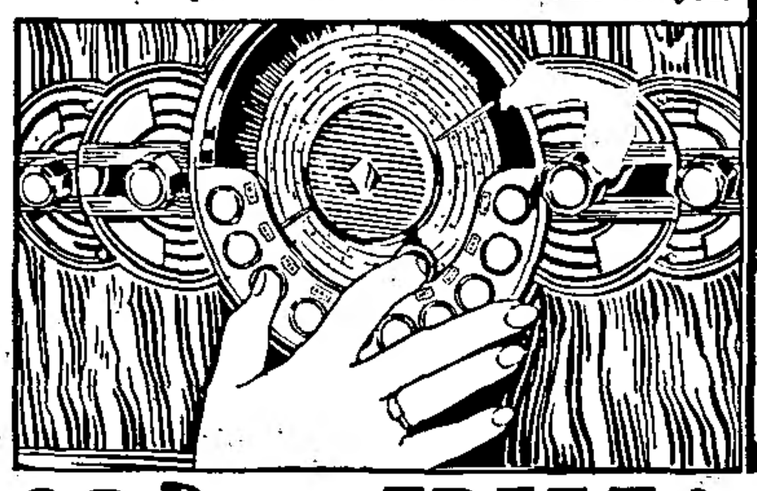

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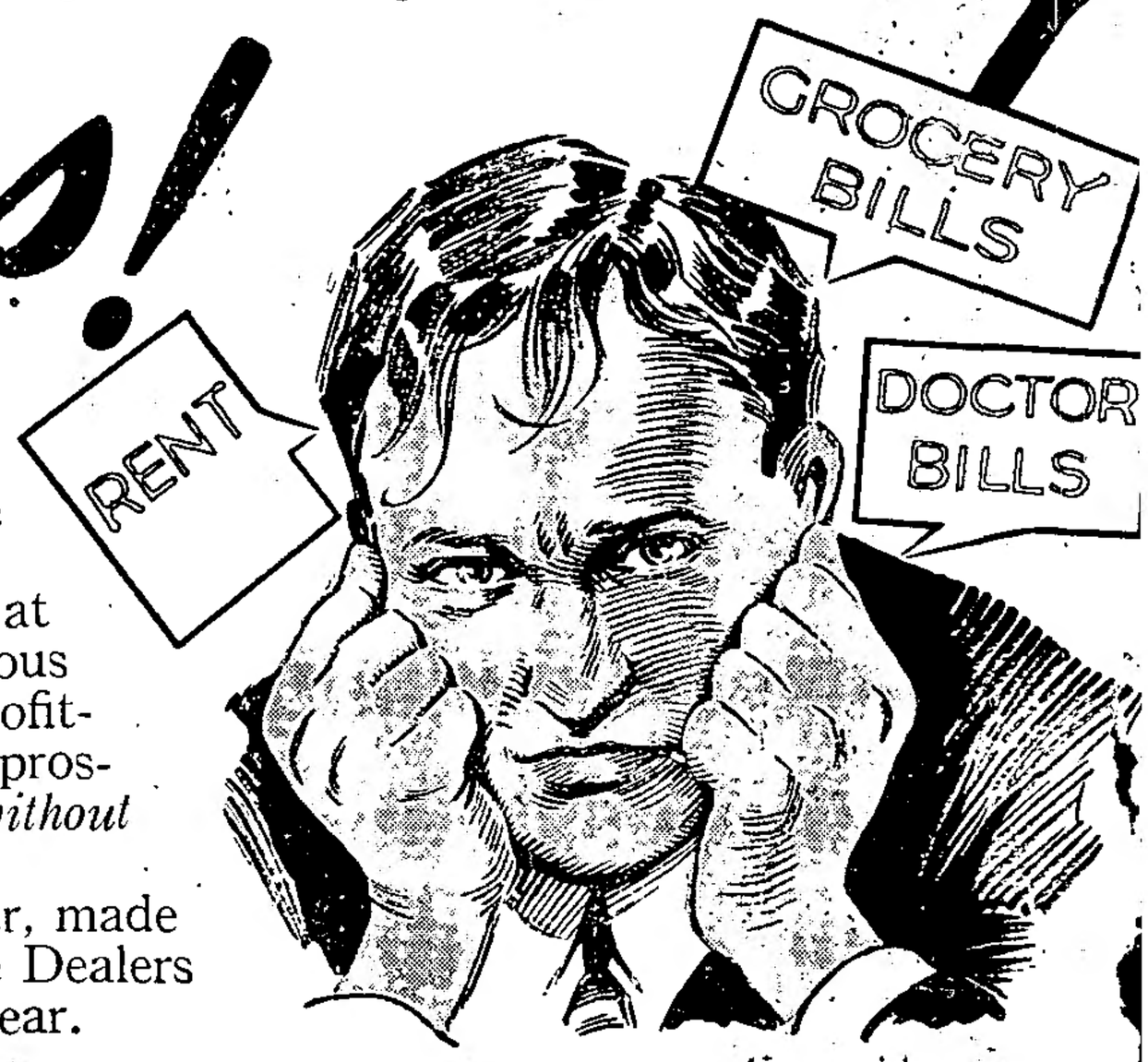

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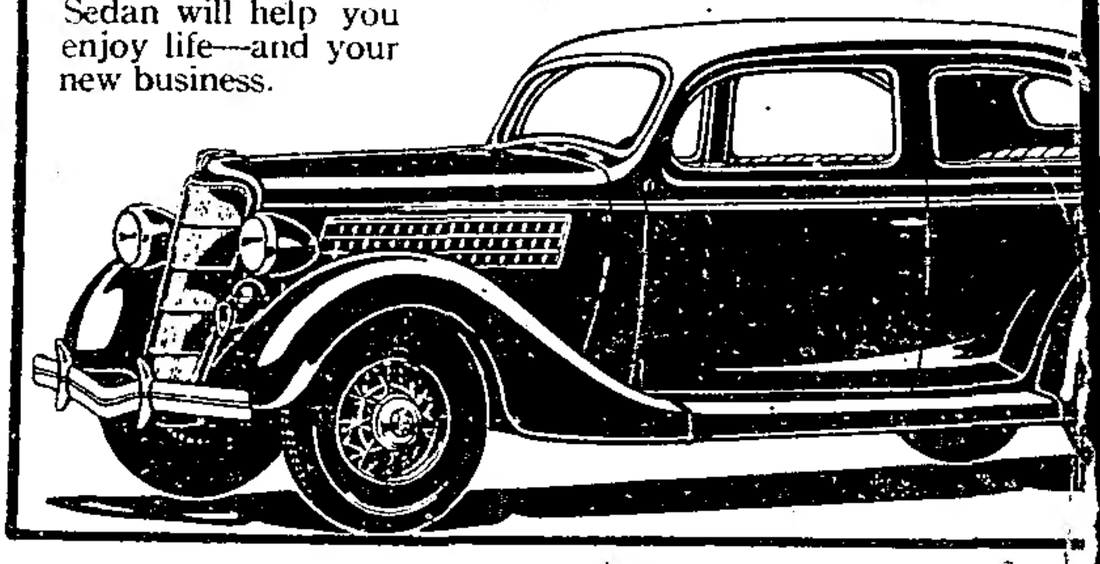
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